Monsigny

by

Justus Miles Forman

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MONSIGNY

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

JOURNEYS END

THE GARDEN OF LIES

Karl Anderson

MONSIGNY

by

Justus Miles Forman

with Drawings by
Karl Anderson.

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TO
MY MOTHER

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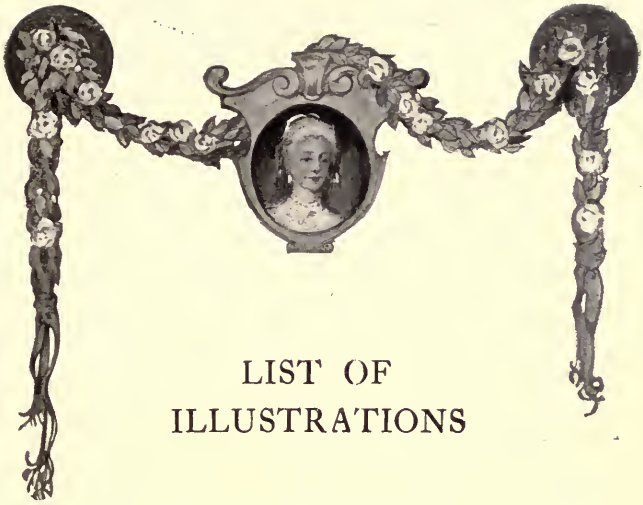

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MONSIGNY

CHAPTER I

WHEN the twenty-first Marquis de Monsigny died, in 1875, the title lapsed, since there was no male heir, but Château Monsigny, near Versailles, and the fortune, which was large, passed to the Marquis's young daughter Isabeau, who had married, but a few months before, Richard, Viscount Stratton, eldest son of the Earl of Strope.

This marriage was, from a worldly point of view, by no means a proud one for an heiress of one of the oldest houses in France, but it was a love match, and the Marquis, who was an old man, made very gentle by great suffering, and come, moreover, to the years when all matters of rank and title seem but petty things, would not oppose it, but gave his ready consent, stipulating only that the young couple should make Château Monsigny their home, rather than Strope Manor, even when, in course of time, the Viscount should succeed to his father's title; so that, though the Monsigny name must die, the château might not

pass from Monsigny blood into strange and careless hands.

And so, when the old gentleman was at last carried away swiftly by one of the ailments that wait upon extreme age, Richard Viscount Stratton and Isabeau, his wife, settled down in the ancient home of her fathers, to the stately, quiet life of French aristocracy, seeing little of that Paris which lay so near at hand, but taken up wholly with the great passion of love which they bore each other.

They were a strange couple in many ways; they seemed strangely mismated, for the Englishman was a strong, silent, cold man, iron-faced and sparing of speech; while Isabeau de Monsigny was all tenderness and soft affection, all melting glances and caressing words. One would have prophesied two broken hearts at the end of a month, but those few who were privileged to visit Château Monsigny at this time have said that the happiness of the two was something more wonderful than may be told. They have said how Lord Stratton's hard, grim face was wont to soften most strangely when his wife was by, and his eyes to follow her as she moved about, and his voice to take on a certain low tone when he spoke to her.

They have said how Isabeau was wont to start

and flush a little when her husband spoke, and how she could never go near him without laying her hand upon his arm—touching him somewhere, leaning, for an instant, against his shoulder. They have said how the two would walk together in the dusk or by moonlight, up and down the terrace to the south of the château, or, of a morning, in the rose gardens, and how, when they thought no one was looking, Isabeau would walk a half pace before her husband, leaning back so that her head and shoulders lay upon his breast and his arm held her from falling.

They have related many such little things in trying to picture a love far too great to be pictured, and have shaken their heads when questioned further, saying in awed, hushed tones that such a love is for no man to attempt to probe or to describe.

Then, since it is not allowed that a perfect joy shall endure here below, Isabeau de Monsigny, when she had been two years married, bore a daughter, and, after lingering between worlds for another year, died with her beautiful head upon her husband's shoulder, and was laid in the old chapel of Château Monsigny with the others of her name.

Men said that Lord Stratton was altered very

little outwardly. His face went a little thinner and more impassive and grim, and his hair turned a bit gray, but no one ever saw him show signs of grief. He shut himself up in the château with the child and a few servants, and for fifteen years he lived a virtual hermit, seldom leaving the estate, save that now and then he was compelled to go to England for a few days upon affairs connected with his property there.

And as time went on, his father, the old Earl of Strope, came to spend a great deal of his time at the château, partly because he was much out of humour with the political trend in his own country and considered that the British Empire was, notwithstanding his warnings, on the broad path to ruin, and partly because he was genuinely fond, in his gruff, undemonstrative fashion, of his eldest son, whom he persisted in considering an irresponsible child.

The two men were, even at this time, singularly alike in almost every way, and they grew more so with each succeeding year till the very end of the Earl's long life. They were tall men—and in this matter the elder had the advantage of an inch or so, for he must have been quite six feet two or three—loose-boned and lean, but very broad in the shoulders and long in arms and legs. They

had thin faces with a strong, hooked nose, and deepset eyes, and a square jaw, and they both wore a rather heavy drooping mustache, and a *mouche* beneath the lower lip. The Earl's hair and mustache were almost entirely white; there was the slighest tinge of reddish colour in them, though his hair had been, in earlier life, a pale yellow, and not red. The Viscount's hair was grizzled, yellow and gray. Further, the old Earl had extremely heavy and projecting eyebrows, with a trick of working them up and down in a most surprising fashion. He was an enormously powerful man physically—much more so than his son, and became in his old age rather vain of his strength, and fond of performing feats, though he often forgot how strong he was and broke things about him quite unintentionally, or nearly crushed the hand of a friend in an absent-minded grip.

It must have been a very strange life that they led at Château Monsigny during those years, the two silent, stern men and the child with her governesses and tutors—English and French women. The child, as she grew into girlhood, came to be like her mother to a startling degree.

"She is all Monsigny; there is nothing Stratton about her, thank God!" the Viscount had said

one day to his father as they stood on the high south terrace of the château and watched her rolling about in the dust of the drive below with a certain shaggy puppy with whom she was on terms of intimacy.

The old Earl laughed. "Yes, thank God!" said he. "It would have been a pity if she had resembled us. We should not make very handsome women, you and I. She is all Monsigny, but her hair is paler than her mother's."

And this was true. Isabeau de Monsigny the elder—they had named the child after her mother—had had very beautiful yellow hair, but the little girl's hair was so pale that it was almost white. While she was very young it bade fair considerably to lessen her beauty, and the women of the château were wont to shake their heads over it sadly, but later, when she was old enough to dispense with braids and to coil the pale mass upon her head, they saw, all at once, how amazingly beautiful it was in contrast with her very pink skin and her dark eyebrows and purple eyes.

It must have been a strange life and very lonely, for hardly any one was asked to the château or dared pass its gates uninvited. The child was busy with her lessons and with her play, and the two men occupied themselves with

the management of the property, or, if it was the season, shot or fished over the coverts and streams of the vast estate.

But when the child began to grow tall and slender and to lengthen her skirts, and ceased rolling about in the dust with the puppies; when it became very evident that she was a child no longer, the Viscount seemed to waken with a start from his long apathy. He saw that his responsibilities must now be heavy, that his daughter might no longer be left in the care of servants and governesses, and that this life of utter seclusion must come to an end.

He sent first for a certain French woman, Madame de Brissal, a widowed relative of his dead wife, a drab-coloured individual who wore caps and knit impossible articles of gray wool which, when finished, were never again seen; and this woman who was, withal, a kindly and motherly old soul, he installed at Château Monsigny to lend the girl countenance in the event of the coming, from time to time, of visitors.

Also he took his daughter occasionally to Paris, where he saw to it that she was properly outfitted by the proper people. It gave him a little shock of keen pleasure, not unmixed with as keen a pain, to see that she had her mother's judgment, almost

amounting to genius in its originality, about matters of dress, though he was not a man who, as a rule, noticed such things in women.

Being an Englishman and without the continental conservatism, he also took her, when they were in town, to the opera and to certain of the less objectionable plays at the theatre, and he drove with her on fine days in the Bois or up the Champs Elysées and into the Avenue. And, late in the winter, when the tide of people was turning southward to escape the wind and cold rain, they would go for a month to Nice or to Cannes or to Mentone, where he had a villa, or even to Rome.

"For," he said once or twice to the girl, "though you are all French and never will be anything but French, I don't want you to grow up the ignorant fool that other French girls are. You might as well become used to seeing a man without palpitation of the heart, and to realising that the world is not bounded by the walls of Château Monsigny. I am not certain that those queer American young women are not worth learning a thing or two from—all but their voices, that is."

So the heiress of one of the oldest, proudest houses in all France came, in due time, to twenty years, with an endowment of beauty probably as

extraordinary as any woman in Europe could boast, and with a knowledge of the world—or at least such aspects of the polite world—as a girl may safely see, which might well have caused the twenty-one Marquesses of Monsigny to turn protestingly in their ornate tombs.

CHAPTER II

CHAPTER II

TOWARD the middle of the summer in which Isabeau reached her twentieth year, Lord Stratton had asked a few people out to Château Monsigny from Paris, for a fortnight. Three of them had, greatly to his annoyance, been called across the channel at the eleventh hour, but the other two, a certain English widow whom he had met the preceding winter in Cannes, and a young man, the Honourable Ashton Beresford, had accepted the invitation. Lord Stratton was annoyed about the other people, because without them the presence of the English widow, Mrs. Marlowe, must bear a certain point which he wished to avoid. He had relied upon the others to cloak this opportunity of his seeing a great deal of Mrs. Marlowe, day by day, without seeming outwardly to pay her marked attention, for he had come to the age when men consider many things important which a younger and more impetuous man would scorn. He believed himself genuinely interested in this woman, for she appealed to him in almost every way, and he had

begun to feel lonely. He realised that in time, probably no long time, Isabeau must marry, and he looked forward to a solitary old age with great distaste. He had not a great love to offer, he knew that well, for nearly all the love of his life was bound within a certain marble tomb that stood in the ancient chapel of Château Monsigny; but the past four or five years of moving about among his kind, coming after his long seclusion, had awakened in him a perfectly normal desire to live as did others, to seek a companionship sweetened by such love as he had left in him, against the time when his daughter must leave him alone.

He had written to Mrs. Marlowe, at her hotel, a letter of direction as to what train to take from the Gare St. Lazare to Versailles, telling her that she would be met at the Versailles station, but this letter she had mislaid and, after some hasty inquiries at the hotel, hurried across the city to the Gare Montparnasse, and took a train, over the Chemin de fer de l'Ouest, arriving at Versailles at much the expected time but, naturally, at the wrong station. Here, finding no carriage in waiting, she drove over to the château, a matter of half an hour, in a public fiacre, much to the amusement of Lord Stratton, whom she found

walking up and down the south terrace with a pipe between his teeth.

"It is of no consequence except that it has been uncomfortable for you," he said when she had made her excuses. "Isabeau is waiting with the carriage in Versailles, but she will return presently. Perhaps you would like to walk about out here, for a bit, till she comes. You see, Madame de Brissal is with her, and I do not know where my father may be—in the gardens, I dare say."

They walked slowly up and down the stretch of the broad terrace and Mrs. Marlowe looked about her with a very obvious delight. She was a pretty woman who might well have been beautiful a few years earlier in life, for she was quite five-and-thirty, and looked a bit tired and worn, particularly about the eyes, as if long unhappiness had robbed her of much of the beauty which she might otherwise have preserved for many years. She was of the very dark type, with black hair, and what is curiously termed an olive skin, and her eyes were uncommonly fine—gray and deep and changing with every mood, though, as has been said, tired, as if she had not been happy. She had a little girlish trick, when very pleased, of clasping her hands at her breast and smiling with flushed cheeks

and parted lips and eyes wide open. It was perfectly genuine and unconscious, and people, particularly men, were used to call it forth upon many pretexts for the pure pleasure of watching it. She smiled now and clasped her hands as she looked about her.

"How perfectly beautiful it is!" she cried softly. "How beautiful it is! One ought to be very happy here, Lord Stratton."

"It is beautiful," said Lord Stratton. "I have always held that it is the finest château short of the Loire country—the finest in private ownership, I mean. Of course, Versailles and St. Germain and even Fontainebleau are more impressive, but hardly so beautiful, I think. Yes," he went on after a pause, "one might be very happy here. I have been very happy here, and very unhappy—and I have been neither the one nor the other, but quite apathetic for a long time. That is much like every one's life, isn't it? But I am fond of Château Monsigny. I shall never feel quite at home anywhere else, I think, not even in Strope Manor. You see, I have lived here for more than twenty years."

"Twenty years?" said Mrs. Marlowe thoughtfully. "That is a long time. And you will live here always, will you not?"

"Not after Isabeau marries," said he, "and, of course, she will sometime marry. Indeed, I should be glad, in a way, if it could be soon. Isabeau is twenty, and I believe in early marriages. One has the keenest capacity for happiness when one is young. Of course it will be a great pain to me, a dreadful wrench when she leaves me, but I wish her to be happy. My father and I will make our permanent home then in Strope Manor, I expect, though I should hope very often to visit Isabeau here. Indeed, I know my father would insist upon it, for he and Isabeau are always together."

"Ah, the Earl!" said Mrs. Marlowe with a little shiver. "I used to see him at Nice, though I never met him, I believe. Do you know, I am rather afraid of the Earl, he is such a fierce old gentleman. His eyes seem to pierce fairly through one."

Lord Stratton laughed. "Oh, you will get over that," said he. "My father is not so fierce by half as he looks. Indeed, he is usually the mildest of men, though he takes strange dislikes to people sometimes. He has aged greatly in the past five years—you know he is nearly eighty—so that he is at times a bit peculiar—not quite himself. Of course he is absolutely

harmless, always; but when he is in one of his spells he is a little inconsequent, and embarrassingly frank as to his opinions. I hope you won't take offense at anything he may say. As a rule, you know, he is as reasonable as you and I, and his mental vigour is as astonishing as his physical strength. I dare say you have heard of his strength. It is almost unbelievable. He is always forgetting about it, and breaking things. I have seen him do the most amazing feats. He is even now many times stronger than I, and I am not weak. But we were speaking of Isabeau and the possibility of her marrying."

"Why should you leave Château Monsigny when she marries?" asked Mrs. Marlowe. "Oh, I see! It belongs to her, does it not?"

"Yes," said Lord Stratton, "Château Monsigny belongs to Isabeau, together with a very considerable fortune. She is the only living member of the family, though I hope there will be many more."

"I suppose you have no one in view?" suggested Mrs. Marlowe, "no possibility as yet? It would be a very important marriage, would it not? The Monsigny heiress and a great beauty, too. One would be rather particular."

Lord Stratton hesitated. "Why," said he,

after a moment, "I had intended saying nothing about it, and have said nothing to any one else, but I should be rather glad for Isabeau to marry a young man who is coming here this evening. I have known him for two or three years, and I admire him more than any man I ever knew. He has no fortune and no title, though he will come into a title in a few years—an Irish one, alas! But he is the sort of man one cares for. I should be very sorry to see her marry any one of the young men who bear the great old names of France, for I know them all. This man has stopped with us once, down in Mentone, and I think he and Isabeau were much taken with each other, though I gave them little opportunity to be in each other's company. I wonder if you will ever have met him; his name is Beresford—Ashton Beresford. He has not been much in Europe for the past few—— Why, what is the matter? Are you ill? Are you faint? Let me take your arm. It is the sun, I expect. I should not have let you walk in it so long."

Mrs. Marlowe pulled herself up with a little shivering laugh, and covered her eyes with her hands for a moment.

"No," she said, laughing again, "it wasn't the sun; it was that wretched little lizard that ran

under our feet. I have a perfect terror of them —lizards and snakes and all those crawling things. Don't be alarmed. Women have queer dislikes sometimes, you know, and—likes. What were you saying? Oh, about this young man, Mr.—Mr. Beresford?"

"Yes, Beresford," said Lord Stratton. "I am sorry about the lizard. I am afraid you will have a bad time, for there are no end of them about. They come out on the flagstones to sun themselves, you know. It is very interesting to study people's dislikes. Now, I have an entirely uncontrollable horror of dead things. The unexpected sight of a dead dog or cat, or even a rat, will give me a nervous shock which will last for hours, though I am not in the least a nervous man. My father is afraid of snakes, but not, I believe, of lizards; and with Isabeau, I think it is spiders. Every one has some pet horror, and in nearly every case it is something quite harmless. Are you altogether recovered?"

"Oh, quite!" said Mrs. Marlowe. "It was very silly of me. And this—this Mr. Beresford?"

"Ah, yes," said Lord Stratton. "I was saying that Beresford had not been much in Europe recently. He had an unfortunate experience about five years ago, which embittered him con-

siderably, and drove him to traveling for distraction. I did not know him at the time, and can speak of the thing only from hearsay; but he became involved, I believe, in a rather widely published divorce case. A certain Colonel Travers named him in obtaining a divorce from his wife. I think the general impression was that Beresford was made a victim. Personally, I am quite sure of it, for I know him well, and he is not the sort of man to figure in divorce suits. I dare say his silence over the matter was to shield somebody—probably the woman. At any rate, I would trust him implicitly."

"I think," said Mrs. Marlowe, turning to look at the gray stone façade of the château, "I think I—remember something about the affair. I had forgotten the names. Yes, I dare say your friend was innocent. I believe people thought so at the—at the time. Yes, I suppose it has embittered him. It was rather hard on him. There's the woman, though! It was harder on her than on any one, wasn't it? Poor woman! No one pitied her, I expect. They'd say it served her right. They always do. Yes, the woman had the worst of it."

"Pardon me," said Lord Stratton, "but I do not agree with you at all. Divorces are never

granted against a woman in England without excellent cause. I am not an intolerant man, I think, but I have no sympathy with that sort of woman."

Mrs. Marlowe halted in her slow walk and leaned against the stone of the château, warm where the sun had been upon it.

"No," said she, with a little smile that seemed a bit tired; "no, I didn't expect you would have. No one has. And yet—— Oh, well, let us talk about something more cheerful! How has Isabeau been since last winter in Nice? What a beauty the child is! I wonder if she realises how dreadfully cheap and commonplace she makes the poor little charms of the rest of us. I never saw another woman of just her type, I think. That wonderfully pale hair of hers makes such an amazing contrast to her dark eyes and eyebrows, and to her pink skin. Other women with that ashen hair have white eyelashes and eyebrows, and china eyes, but Isabeau's eyes are purple. I wonder if she stains her eyebrows."

Lord Stratton laughed. "Not unless she commenced in the nursery," said he. "They have always been dark. She is very like—like her mother." His voice changed a little, and the woman looked up at him swiftly. "Only," he

went on, "her hair is almost silvery instead of golden. That is a debt she owes to a certain fifteenth-century ancestress, a Bretonne, Yvonne de Morlaix, who was carried off from her father's château by a Marquis de Monsigny, between two days, and made a marquise. The hair appears every now and then, once in two or three generations, possibly, and as a rule in the women of the family. Yes, Isabeau is a great beauty. I suppose she is the most beautiful girl in Europe. The Grand Duke Michael was saying so, only last winter. And, thank heaven, she is as lovely as she is beautiful. I do not think she is a coquette —that is to say, more of a coquette than any woman naturally is; and I know she is not vain." He paused a moment to laugh. "It will be reasonably evident," said he, "that I am a bit proud of my daughter."

Then all at once he turned, standing at a little distance, and looked very gravely into the woman's eyes.

"It would be a greater pleasure to me than I can express," he said, "if you and Isabeau should become fond of each other."

Mrs. Marlowe flushed, and her eyelids drooped. One of her hands rose uncertainly to the lace at her throat. "I—I don't know—just what you

—mean," she said, very low. "I—could not help loving that beautiful child, if I would. I am certain to become more and more fond of her if —if ever I am thrown much in her—in her company. I am not so sure of her as of myself. I doubt if I am the sort to attract a girl. I have not had a very happy life, Lord Stratton, and I have lost all the girlishness I may ever have possessed."

Lord Stratton moved nearer and took one of her hands in his, looking down into her eyes.

"I am sorry," he said simply, and there was something in his perfectly earnest tone, and in the big quiet rugged strength of him, as he bent from his height, that lent a value to the trite words. "I am not an eloquent man," he went on, "I am not at all good at saying things, but I should like to help you forget that you have been unhappy. It seems to me that fate is sometimes very stupid in bringing grief to the wrong people."

"Do you think, Lord Stratton," said the woman, looking up into his still, square face where grief had been and left great scars and furrows, "do you think that one can forget? Do you think that one can put everything behind, and build a new life—oh, quite a new life?" There was a certain great wistfulness in her tone and in

her upturned eyes, a certain appeal as of weakness to strength, for reassurance and protection. And the hand that lay in his firm grip trembled a little.

"Yes," said Lord Stratton, looking down with steady eyes, "yes, one may put everything behind but love and sin, for a great love may never be forgotten in this life nor, I believe, beyond, and sin must be expiated here below. But I think neither of these things has any part in you. Everything else may be forgotten. Will you let us help you to forget? I do not like to think of you suffering."

Mrs. Marlowe withdrew her hand quietly and turned half away, looking across the tree tops to the west, where the sun lay yellow upon the hills. And there was a little tired smile at her lips.

"Everything but love and sin?" said she. "Everything but love and sin! I wonder if you are right."

A bugle blew, to the eastward, very thin and faint and sweet with the distance.

"Ah!" said Lord Stratton, "that will be Isabeau returning from Versailles. The porter at the lodge blows a bugle when a carriage enters the gates. She will be here in a moment."

They moved to the outer edge of the raised

terrace, and stood by the low balustrade watching the avenue where it emerged from the gloom of the fir-trees and swept across the open to encircle the château, on its way to the stables beyond. After four or five minutes—for the avenue was long—an open landau, behind white horses, appeared and drew swiftly up to the broad steps of the terrace, and Lord Stratton went down to assist his daughter and Mme. de Brissal to alight.

Isabeau, in a very fluffy pink-and-white summer frock and hat, and armed with a surprisingly ornate sunshade of the same material, went up at once to welcome the visitor. The elder woman gave a little gasp of sheer wonder.

"My dear!" she cried, "you are the most beautiful thing I ever saw in the world! You grow more beautiful every day."

"Oh, please, please!" begged the girl, distressedly. "It—it is so good of you, but *so* good! But I—I——"

"Stop flattering my daughter," called Lord Stratton from the foot of the steps. "You will make her vain, and then there'll be no living with her." He presented Mrs. Marlowe to Mme. de Brissal, and told Isabeau to have the visitor shown to her apartments.

"Propriety has kept us out here on the terrace,

waiting for you, for nearly an hour," said he. "Mrs. Marlowe will be thinking us heathen."

Then, when the ladies had gone inside, and the landau had moved on toward the stables, he fell again to pacing up and down the length of the stone-paved terrace, with his head bent and his hands clasped behind him. There was a deep crease between his brows.

About half an hour later he saw the Earl coming up from the stables toward the château, and paused in his walk to watch him. The crease between his brows disappeared for an instant, and he gave a short laugh, as if something amused him.

"What are you laughing at?" growled the old gentleman, mounting the steps of the terrace, and throwing his riding-crop into a chair. "Is there anything funny about me? You have no manners at all." And his heavy white eyebrows worked up and down in a quite intimidating fashion.

"I was thinking, as I watched you come up," said Lord Stratton, "how ridiculously alike we are. I might be looking into a mirror at this moment, except that your hair is whiter."

Indeed, the resemblance was amazing, and evoked much comment wherever the two men

were seen together. The old Earl's hair, as Lord Stratton had said, was whiter and a bit more sparse, and his eyebrows had grown enormously long and protruding—shaggy penthouses for his keen eyes. Also, his skin had taken on the extreme glassy smoothness of old age, and the veins rose under it very prominently. His great shoulders had a slight stoop, but they were nearly as powerful as ever.

His rugged old face relaxed a bit, and he gave a little laugh, for he was very proud of this likeness between himself and his son, as proud of it as of his own great strength. He laid an arm over Lord Stratton's shoulders, and the two walked slowly up and down the terrace.

"Alike?" said the Earl. "Of course we are alike. Why shouldn't we be? All the Stratton men have been alike. It is a great pity, though, that you are such a weakling. You will probably die young. Now I dare say I shall live to a hundred. Has that woman come?"

"If you mean Mrs. Marlowe," said Lord Stratton, "yes, she came about an hour ago. It is not very civil of you, though, to call her 'that woman.'"

"I don't like her," said the old gentleman gruffly. "I don't believe she is honest. I used

to see her about, down in Nice, and her eyes are always scared. When you are a bit older you will know enough not to trust any one with frightened eyes. She is hiding something that she is afraid people will find out. What do you know about her, anyhow? Nothing!"

"Oh, nonsense!" cried Lord Stratton, with some heat. "I know, and you know, too, that she was received everywhere in Nice, and there must have been people there who knew all about her. As for her frightened eyes, she has had an unhappy life. It leaves marks, unhappiness. I dare say she had a brute of a husband. If you must be suspicious, for heaven's sake don't pick out our guests for your victims."

The Earl gave an inarticulate growl and shook his head.

"Who else is coming?" he demanded presently.

"The Lawsons and Mrs. Lawson's sister, Lady Eversham, were to have come," said the other, "but they were called away to England at the last moment. Ashton Beresford is coming. He should be here in an hour or two."

"Ah!" said the Earl, in a tone of great satisfaction. "Young Beresford! Now, there is a man I like. He is a very proper sort indeed, for a mere boy. We shall be great friends. I was

never entirely satisfied, at Mentone, as to which of us was the stronger. I am glad he is to be here. I shall make him stay a long time." And the old gentleman rubbed his hands and smiled in huge delight.

Lord Stratton halted, as if tired of his walk, and sat down upon the broad stone coping of the balustrade. The crease had come between his brows again, and he stared off into the blue distance from narrowed eyes.

"Isabeau will marry, sometime," said he, in the tone of one who opens a discussion.

"Well," said the Earl, "most people do. What of it? If only she would have the good sense to pick out some one like young Beresford, it would be an excellent thing, though she is not long out of the cradle."

"And I," continued Lord Stratton, frowning still into the blue distance, "I shall be left alone. I shall be very lonely."

"Lonely!" growled his father, "lonely? Nonsense! Am I of no account? I am not thinking of marrying or of dying either. I expect to outlive you. Besides, we should come here often to visit Isabeau—if we liked her husband."

But Lord Stratton shook his head.

"No," said he, "I should be very lonely. I

have grown used to having Isabeau about, and a life without a woman in it would be something that I shrink from. It is no disloyalty to—to Her, but I cannot bear the thought of living alone. I shall never love again—not greatly, that is, and I shall never forget, but I dread being left alone, more than I can say. What would you think if I should marry again?"

The old Earl halted before his son, and his strong jaw dropped in sheer amazement.

"Marry—again?" he cried. "You marry—again? Good God, you are mad! You do not know what you are saying. What should I think of it? I tell you I won't hear of it—not for a moment. I forbid it absolutely. I can't think what has brought you to such an absurd notion. Your brother has sons. Marry again, indeed!"

"Of course," said Lord Stratton, laughing a little, "the idea is new to you, and I am not altogether surprised at your opposing it—though as to forbidding, that is just a bit extreme, is it not? I am not exactly a child, you know. I am nearly fifty years old."

"Fifty? Nonsense!" cried the old gentleman angrily. "You are a mere boy, and you are mad into the bargain. I tell you, I forbid any such

folly as you propose. I am the head of the house, and I am your father. Let us talk no more about it. It is out of the question."

"By all means," agreed Lord Stratton, "let us talk no more about it. We have never quarreled, seriously, and we must not commence it now. I am glad you feel pleased about young Ashton Beresford's coming here. I remember that you two were great friends at Mentone."

The old Earl paused a moment near the door of the château, and the keen eyes under their great white brows rested thoughtfully upon the younger man.

"I should like to know," said he, "if it is this Marlowe woman who has put such extraordinary notions into your head. If it is, you will be very sorry one day. I tell you she is not honest. She has frightened eyes."

CHAPTER III

CHAPTER III

The Honourable Ashton Beresford arrived that evening barely in time to dress for dinner. Indeed, the ladies were already at their toilet, and he was received only by Lord Stratton and the old Earl, the latter of whom exhibited a gruff warmth of greeting most unusual with him.

Beresford was not a handsome young man; indeed, he was almost ugly, but it was an ugliness that attracted always rather than repelled, and the strong ruggedness of his face, irregular as it was, had no suggestion of coarseness. He was not so tall by a very little as the two men who were his hosts, being a trifle under six feet; but, as the Earl of Strope had said, he was phenomenally strong, though he never made any show of his strength when it could be avoided.

He was lean, like the Earl and Lord Stratton, but dark-haired and gray-eyed. He had one feature which seemed curiously at variance with all his other outward characteristics, for his mouth, set in a strong, stern face, eagle-beaked and square-jawed, was the mouth of a woman,

though he seemed by habit to have drawn its curves into a straightness and hardness unnatural to them. And this woman's mouth, so out of place over its jutting chin, was a sort of outward and visible symbol of certain very important elements of character and of temperament that were always at war with the man's nature, and that gave rise to some very interesting results, as such elements are apt to do.

The three men were standing in the great central hall of the château when the ladies came down to dinner. This hall was in the oldest portion of the building and, being a rather cheerless place, was seldom used save on very formal occasions, for the newer wings, which had been from time to time added to the ancient pile, were far more comfortable. It was a very long room, comparatively narrow and of great height, arched over with stone in the ancient fashion, stone-walled and paved with flags of black and white, worn with age and sunken here and there. There was a balcony at one end, with mullioned windows behind and under it, and in the gray stone walls there were niches filled with marble busts of the Marquises of Monsigny.

In a long row against one wall the armour of all the heads of the house stood upon effigies, and

their shields and weapons hung above. At night the great room was lighted by lamps which hung on chains from the high arches, but there was a row of clere-story windows far up near the roof, to let in the daylight.

A fire burned in the huge fireplace at one side, and before it the three men stood talking, but no fire could warm the great hall even in the heart of summer. It was chill and damp and smelled of the grave.

"We have only one other guest," Lord Stratton was saying. "The Lawsons and Lady Eversham disappointed us. I hope it won't be dull for you. Mrs. Mar——" But, just at that moment, a servant parted the hangings from the arched doorway and the three ladies came down the room.

Beresford's gaze was fixed upon Isabeau de Monsigny—she was always called de Monsigny because she was the heiress of that house—and he had no eyes for her two companions. She was again in pink, for she knew that it suited her to perfection, and her strange pale hair glowed silver in the light from the hanging lamps. He thought that he had never in all his life seen anything so marvelously beautiful—which was, in sober truth, undoubtedly so; and the blood surged to his

temples and beat there furiously while he took her hand and looked down into her eyes, quite oblivious of the fact that he should first have greeted Madame de Brissal.

Lord Stratton was presenting his father to Mrs. Marlowe. That lady changed colour a bit under the glare of the old gentleman's piercing eyes, and advanced a rather unsteady hand, which the Earl promptly enclosed in a grip that would have crushed a hand of wood. It immediately evoked a very heartfelt scream.

"What is the matter?" he demanded. "Eh, what, what? Oh, I beg pardon! Did I hurt you? Didn't mean to do that. Beg pardon. Don't look so frightened. Your eyes are always scared. Nothing to be afraid of here, my dear, if you haven't done anything wrong. Don't look so frightened." And he turned impatiently to Madame de Brissal.

Beresford had, by this time, so nearly come to his senses as to pay his respects to the old French woman, whom he genuinely liked, and was inquiring of her after the well-being of a certain great Persian cat which was, next to Isabeau, the pride of her existence, and which had been dangerously ill the winter before in Mentone. But Lord

Stratton took him by the arm and turned him about.

"Mrs. Marlowe," he said, "will you allow me to present the Honourable Ashton Beresford?"

Isabeau, who was watching young Beresford's face for reasons of her own, thought that a sudden slight spasm passed over it as he faced the other guest, that the lips drew very tight for a moment, and the eyes narrowed. Also, she was quite certain that he quickly withdrew the hand he had put forward, and she wondered if he could ever have known this woman at some previous time, or if she recalled to him something disagreeable. But if, for the moment, he showed any slight sign of emotion, it was gone at once, and his manner, as he made some civil and commonplace remark, was quite ordinary. As for Mrs. Marlowe, her bearing was so altogether self-possessed that Isabeau began to think she must have been mistaken, and to call herself impolite names for creating drama where there was nothing dramatic.

They went in to dinner at once, and the Earl offered some slight divertisement during the soup by breaking a flower vase. It had been set too near his plate, and in attempting to remove it he crushed the strong glass in his great hand and spread a little lake of water out over the table.

"Dear me!" said he. "That was very careless. They really should not put fragile things about where I can get at them. I am so cursedly strong, you know," he apologised mildly, and fell to muttering to himself over his soup in an annoyed undertone.

"You must not mind *grandpère*," said Isabeau to Ashton Beresford, who sat beside her. "When he is in one of his forgetful moods he does the most amazing things. He has been rather low in his mind of late. I hope you will cheer him up. He is tremendously fond of you, you know. I think he has never before met any one as strong as himself."

"It is not exactly flattering to be valued just because one is a sort of a freak of nature," complained Beresford morosely. "One would like to feel that one had personal qualities of a sort—if only one didn't know that one had not."

"Dear me!" said Isabeau with great sympathy. "Have you nothing to recommend you but your strength? I'm so sorry! Still, you know," she went on encouragingly, "it isn't every one who has even the strength." Then she looked up into his face for a moment, not smiling, and he saw that the purple eyes were almost black by candle light, and softer than any words might say.

"Don't be silly!" said the girl, very low. "As if your strength mattered—except to *grandpère!* Still, do you know, it's rather nice to be strong. Aren't you glad you are? I don't think I could ever care—have much respect for a man who was weak. I remember once, down at Mentone, I came into a room, and a wretched little Italian *marchese* ran to get me a chair. There was only one chair in view, and it was rather a heavy one. Would you believe it, that poor little man could not lift it? I had to go and help him. Why, I could have carried the thing myself! And then," continued Mlle. de Monsigny pensively, "then the creature actually tried to make love to me after all that!"

"Now, if only I could have been there!" said Beresford.

"Why—why, yes!" cried the girl quickly. "You could have carried the chair, couldn't you?"

"Carried the chair?" said he.

"Why—yes," said the girl. And he noted that, at times, the contrast between her wonderful pale hair and her pink skin was greatly accentuated. "What else?" said she, looking at the table.

"You said he made love to you," prompted the Honourable Mr. Beresford helpfully.

"I said he tried to," she corrected.

"I wish I'd been there," sighed Mr. Beresford.

The girl looked up for the smallest fraction of a second, with a flash of purple eyes, and a little—oh, a very little !—dimpling smile.

"I think I wish you had been," said she.

"I am here now," he suggested.

"*Grandpère* will be so pleased," said she, and Beresford developed a sudden interest in his dinner.

"Of course we are all pleased," she stated presently.

"Oh !" said Mr. Beresford.

Old Mme. de Brissal was, after her fashion, delivering a placid monologue to the somnolent and wholly inattentive Earl, and Beresford found himself watching the other two at the table. Lord Stratton seemed roused, to a most unusual degree, from his habitual attitude of indifference and reserve. He was leaning forward, with his arms against the edge of the table, toward the woman who sat at his right, and there was an unwonted light in his deep-set eyes, and a slight flush upon his cheeks.

He was talking in a tone of light banter, and

when Lord Stratton descended to banter it meant a great deal.

Beresford sat watching the two under puzzled brows, and then, as he turned with a start of recollection to the girl at his side, he saw that she also was looking toward the other end of the table, and that she was frowning slightly and biting her lip, as if she could not make out the situation. He ventured some commonplace remark, and she turned to him at once, but through all the rest of the dinner she was a bit silent and distrait, and her eyes strayed often down the table toward her father and the woman who sat beyond him.

It was a warm and very beautiful evening, with a moon, and a sky so clear that the stars seemed almost near enough to be touched with the hand. The whole party went out upon the south terrace for their coffee.

Directly before the terrace, the avenue, broad and white in the moonlight, swept past on its course toward the stables; but across the avenue the ground fell away swiftly toward the little flat valley beyond, with its lagoon and its formally arranged shrubbery and grass-plots and paved walks. And in this steep bank, from which the earth had been cut away to make place, a great

fountain had been set, backed by a sculptured wall of marble. There was a huge group of mermen and Nereids with dolphins playing about their feet, and the water spurted over them from the wall behind, and from the mouths of the dolphins. Shrubbery grew close and dark at the sides, and hung over the wall from the bank above, and there was a long pool of still water, marble-curbed, that made an approach to the fountain. Beyond the pool, terraced flights of marble steps, and smaller fountains, swept down to the plaisance below. Also, marble steps ascended in a curve on either side of the great fountain to the avenue and the south terrace of the château. From the plaisance the view of the whole, with the south façade of the château surmounting it, was very beautiful.

Mlle. de Monsigny set her little coffee-cup down upon the tray and crossed to the outer edge of the terrace, where she stood by the marble balustrade, looking down through the wide gap in the trees to the moonlit lowland.

"Would you like to see the fountains in the moonlight?" she said over her shoulder to Beresford. "We think they are rather fine." There was a gasp from the old Mme. de Brissal, and a weak appeal as the two left the terrace.

' They went down the curving marble steps and stood by the little oblong pool '

"Not too far, Isabeau, *ma fille!* It—it may be damp, *là bas.*"

"*Pauvre tante!*" laughed the girl as they were crossing the avenue. "She is dying of horror this moment. She never has forgiven father for bringing me up like an American girl instead of a French one. Father says that French girls are fools, and I believe he is right. All the French girls I know are fools, poor dears! Still, I'm all French myself, except in behaviour. I'm all Monsigny."

They went down the curving marble steps, and stood by the little oblong pool where the water splashed and purled and gurgled, and where very substantial, though somewhat moss-stained, Nereids held off the overardent advances of their companions. The place was chill and smelled of dampness and rank vegetation and wet earth.

And they went farther down, along the terraced flights of steps, where there were no trees to throw a gloom over them, and where the smaller fountains tossed a lazy shower of diamonds into the moonlight, down to the great lagoon, still and black as a lake of ink, save where the moon was mirrored upon it and the band of the Milky Way gleamed dim across its surface. Frogs croaked from the farther side, and a sleepy rook

cawed in the wood beyond. A little night wind, soft and cool and laden with odours, breathed in their faces, and filmed from time to time the broad surface of the water at their feet.

Then, at last, they turned to look back, and all the vast ascending stretch with the château at its crest lay, under the moonlight, strange and beautiful, like a dream picture—very unreal, for there came no sound of any sort from it, nor any movement, nor sign of life.

Young Beresford drew a little quick breath of amazement and delight. It was his first proper view of the château. He had had but a hasty glimpse of it from the avenue on his arrival and, from this point of view, and in the moonlight, it really made an astonishingly beautiful picture.

"That is magnificent!" said he. "Magnificent! You should always give people their first view of Château Monsigny by moonlight, mademoiselle. I don't know how fine it may be by day, but this is wonderful. There are certain things that are peculiarly fine at night—with a moon, that is—the Colosseum in Rome begins the list, I believe. What would the trippers do if they could not write guide-book letters about the Colosseum? And there's the Parthenon and Château Monsigny. I insist it's the finest of them all—Château

Monsigny," he repeated thoughtfully. "It's a page out of the history of France, isn't it? It has bred great men. It's an honourable monument. And all yours, mademoiselle—all yours."

The girl sighed, shaking her head.

"All mine," she said, "though it seems a bit absurd. I think I'm a little glad and I think I'm a little—no, very proud. And I think I'm a little scared, maybe. It's so much bigger than I am! It has been so important for so long. It has been such a page of history, as you say. Yes, I think I'm a little scared. I am the last Monsigny alive. Wouldn't you be frightened just the least bit in the world if you were I, monsieur?"

Young Beresford laughed gently.

"Oh, I'm frightened enough though I am only I," said he. "See what a coward I am!"

"Frightened, monsieur?" she wondered. "Of what, then?"

"Of you, mademoiselle," said young Beresford. "There's a lot more in you to be frightened of than there is in Château Monsigny."

"Frightened of me!" she scoffed. "I am perfectly safe, monsieur—very gentle, and I have never in my life bitten anybody."

"Ah, now, it is a great relief to hear that," said young Beresford. "Still—I am afraid. You are

such an impossibly important heiress, mademoiselle, and you are so impossibly beautiful! It all makes such a barrier, don't you know, like royal blood. The ordinary chap feels as if he oughtn't to come near you till he's sent for, nor speak till he's spoken to." He laughed again with a sort of grave mockery, but Isabeau de Monsigny turned toward him frowning.

"That is very great nonsense!" she said, and Beresford almost laughed again, for the phrase sounded so like the Earl or Lord Stratton.

"What difference does it make," she demanded, "whether a girl is an heiress or not? Nothing sets up such a barrier as you speak of but royal blood, and I've none of that, as you know. And if a girl happens to be—to be—pretty, what of that? The humblest, poorest child in France may be prettier. The head gardener here at Monsigny has a daughter who is the most beautiful woman I ever saw—lovelier than one of his roses. Ah, it is all great nonsense!" She put out one of her hands for an instant and touched his arm as she stood before him in the moonlight.

"Don't talk of—barriers and such, monsieur," she said very low, and smiled up at him a bit wistfully. "I have been looking forward so to —to your coming here! We do not have many

people here at Monsigny. I have been looking forward to such a—good time—like Mentone. Are you going to—spoil it all?"

"Oh, mademoiselle!" cried young Beresford, starting a little toward her. But the girl drew back quickly with a nervous laugh, as if she were afraid of what he might say.

"We—must be going back," she said. "They will think we are lost—down here. Ah, we must get back; come!" And young Beresford, breathing a bit quickly, followed her up the many flights of steps, with a certain odd bit of verse running in his head—all about moonshine and madness.

But when they reached the top of the bank, above the fountain, she paused an instant, under the sheltering gloom of the trees.

"Oh, monsieur!" she cried in a little low breathless voice. "Monsieur, I—would not have you—be afraid! Do not be—afraid!" and she ran swiftly from him into the moonlight of the avenue.

On the great terrace only Mrs. Marlowe was standing beside the little iron coffee-table.

"My dear!" she called as Isabeau came up the steps, "poor Mme. de Brissal has been taken ill—one of her dizzy spells, Lord Stratton says. He wished me to ask you to come in to her as soon

as you had returned. I hope it is nothing serious?"

"Oh, no, indeed," said the girl. "Poor aunt! She has them so often. They pass in a few minutes. Yes, I will go in. Is father there? You will excuse me, Monsieur Beresford?"

She went quickly into the château, and young Beresford was left face to face with the other guest. He drew a long, deep breath.

Mrs. Marlowe set her little cup down upon the tray.

"Well, Tony?" said she.

"Well?" said the Honourable Mr. Beresford.

CHAPTER IV

CHAPTER IV

"HAVE you had a pleasant walk, Tony?" she asked with a queer little laugh.

"Very!" said the Honourable Mr. Beresford. He had leaned back, half sitting, against the marble balustrade of the terrace near the iron table which held the coffee-tray, and the woman came nearer, standing close before him, so that she could see his face plainly in the moonlight.

"How pleasant, Tony?" said she quietly.

The Honourable Mr. Beresford lowered his brows. "That does not—— May I ask if that concerns you?" he inquired.

"Oh, yes," said the woman, looking into his eyes. "Yes, it concerns me. Oh, it concerns me rather intimately." She bent her head for a moment, and fingered the cups and spoons and the silver things on the tray beside her. Then she looked up again, into his eyes.

"It was—very strange our being asked here at the same time, wasn't it? I didn't know you were coming. I didn't hear of it until after I had arrived this afternoon. You did not know about

me, either, did you? I saw you didn't when we met this evening in the hall. You have admirable self-control, Tony. You always had —too much self-control, almost. I should have screamed, I think."

"It was rather a bad moment," agreed Beresford gravely. "Still," he went on, "now that we are here, we must simply make the best of it, I suppose. As a matter of fact, I see no reason whatever for making the situation theatrical. We shall have to be a bit careful about concealing the fact that we—that we have known each other before, and that is all, I should think. Of course," he said, after a moment's pause, and with an obvious effort, "of course, if you greatly prefer, I will go away to-morrow, back to Paris, on business of some sort. I could arrange to be telegraphed for."

The woman looked up eagerly. "Oh, if you could!" she cried. "That would be so much—— No, Tony, no, you must not do that. I won't be so selfish as to allow you to do it. No, that is out of the question. Besides—do you know, I am not at all sure that—that I am not glad you are here. I—— It has been a very long time, hasn't it? Oh, Tony, Tony, my silly heart jumped when I saw you, there in the hall! You looked

so—so like you used!" She took a little turn up the terrace and back again, and her fingers pulled and twisted at the lace handkerchief she carried. Then she faced him again with a sort of defiance in her bearing and in her eyes.

"I—came here to Monsigny for a purpose, Tony," said she in an altered voice.

"Yes?" said Mr. Beresford.

"I came here," said she, "to marry Lord Stratton—to make him want to marry me. He does not know yet whether he wants to marry me or not. In a week, or may be less, he will ask me. I came here to marry Lord Stratton."

"Ah-h!" said Beresford, very low. The woman leaned forward, scanning his face very anxiously, as if she sought to know what his quiet exclamation meant.

"I tell you," she cried after a moment, "I am tired! I am worn out! You do not know what I have been through. I started in so bravely, Tony! I thought I could make a new life for myself. I changed my name for that of a cousin who had died, and I thought I could put all that—that horror and disgrace behind me. But, Tony, Tony, I can't! It haunts me day and night. I never go out on the street, or to a ball, or into the casino at Nice or at Cannes,

or to the Opèra in Paris without quaking in a cold fear that I shall come face to face with some one who knew me before—before the—affair; some one who will call me by the old name, who will let the people I am with know who I was. Sometimes I do see them, the people who would know, and then—then—— Oh, Tony, the dreadful panic—the miserable subterfuges to get away out of their sight into safety! Do you know what Lord Stratton said to me yesterday? I was asking him if one might forget troubles—an unhappy life—and make a new happiness for oneself, and he said that one might forget all save sin and love. Sin and love! Oh, it isn't true. It isn't true! One *may* forget! I tell you I've a right to forget. It is monstrous that one's whole life should be ruined, ruined just for one little year! I tell you——"

"Wait!" said Beresford sharply. "Wait! What do you mean by 'sin' and 'one little year'? Do you mean there was any truth in what was charged at the time of the action? Do you mean that Travers had a right to his divorce?"

The woman fell back a step away from him, stumbling a bit, and her hands flew to her mouth. Her eyes were very wide and she seemed not to breathe at all.

"No, no!" she cried hoarsely. "No, Tony! No, I say! How can you ask such terrible things? You know there was no truth in it at all. You must know it! What did I say? I never said that I had sinned. Tony, don't look at me like that! Can't you understand how I feel about it? You know what the world thinks about a woman who has been divorced. She is an outcast ever after. Is it so strange that I should come to think the same of the Mrs. Travers who is dead? She is dead, Tony—dead forever, but her ghost is haunting me always, till I am half mad. I say. you do not know what I have been through. Why, I have even been poor. I have to contrive wretched little makeshifts to dress decently, to make an appearance. I can bear it no longer, I tell you."

"You might have come to me for that part of it, as well as for the other," said Beresford, and his voice softened.

"Ah, Tony!" she cried. "I could come to you for neither. I had a little remnant of wretched pride left me, and I made out, somehow. Had I not done enough injury as it was? You were dragged into that—that disgrace, and your name was sullied along with mine. I know how you felt the injustice of it, Tony. You are the sort

of man to feel such things. Only, the world is more lenient with a man's honour than with a woman's. They have forgotten your part in it already, but they will never forget Mrs. Travers."

"If you had done as I asked at the time," said Beresford, "you might have been spared all this."

"Yes, Tony," said she, "if I had married you I might have been spared it all. Very often I have wished that I had married you. We should not have been happy, though. You did not love me, Tony. You offered to marry me because, in the world's eyes, it was you who had made the divorce possible." She put out her two hands upon his breast as she stood before him, and her face bore a little wistful, tender smile, in the moonlight.

"I wish you had loved me then, Tony, when you asked me to marry you," said she. "You had loved me a little before, hadn't you—long before? But you would not speak. You tried to hide it because I was another man's wife. I didn't appreciate your love then. Ah, but I'd have treasured it later!"

"Do you—do you care for Lord Stratton?" asked Beresford, and his voice was still gentle and low.

She shook her head slowly. "No," said she.

"No, I don't care for him—not in the way you mean. I don't love him, but I am very tired, Tony, and poor and fagged out. I'm a ship that has had a stormy voyage, and I'm sick for a port. He would be kind to me—very kind and tender and indulgent. I should pass my days contentedly, I think—happily, even. Ah, Tony, how I long for peace, security, a good strong arm to lean on! I should make him a good wife, honestly I should."

"And you'll tell him?" said he. But the fear came into her face, and hurried her breath once more.

"Oh, no, no! Oh, no, Tony!" she cried. "Not that! No, I couldn't tell him. Do you think I should tell him? No, I could not. Listen! It would only distress him—make him unhappy. Mrs. Travers is dead. Why dig her up again? No one would ever know. I swear to you that I would make him a good wife. What does it matter who I was five years ago? You'll not tell him yourself? You'll not ruin me, Tony?"

"No," said Beresford, "I shall not tell him. You know that. It is not my affair. Besides, it is not as if you had been, in the least, in fault at the time of the—five years ago. A great

wrong was done you. If you choose absolutely to bury it, it is no affair of mine."

"No," said Mrs. Marlowe, looking over the tree tops to the star-strewn sky; "no, it is not as if I had—been in—fault."

Then, after a little silence, she came and sat beside him on the coping of the marble balustrade, with her hands clasped upon her knees and her face turned up to the sky. There was a little soft reminiscent smile at her lips.

"Do you know, Tony," said she, "it wasn't all so bad, in those days, was it? In spite of all the horror and the shame and the disgrace, it wasn't all so bad. I had you. It was very good to be able to lay everything upon your shoulders, to feel how strong and cool and sure you were, to know that you would do all that a man might do, and that you would never save yourself by hurting me. You held your tongue about many things to save me, when by speaking you could have cleared your own name, didn't you, Tony? Ah, no, it wasn't all bad! Sometimes, since, when I've been feeling very blue, and very tired out, and very lonely, I've wished those days were back, terrible as they were, just because they held you."

She turned her head away from him with a nervous laugh.

"You'd be surprised, Tony," said she, "if I could tell you how I felt this evening when I saw you again after so long. It brought back a queer great rush of recollections and—and things, a queer rush of them. Did it mean—nothing to you, when you saw me—nothing but surprise? Had you forgotten—oh, everything save that I brought a stain upon you? You—you cared—a little, once, didn't you? Had you quite forgotten, Tony?"

He made no answer, and Mrs. Marlowe sat a long time silent, pulling and twisting at the bit of lace in her hands.

"She's—a very beautiful girl, Tony," said she at last.

"Yes," said Beresford gravely. "She is a very beautiful girl. She is the most beautiful woman in Europe, I suppose."

"And very rich," pursued Mrs. Marlowe.

"And very rich," he agreed.

"Shall you marry her, Tony?" said the woman in a low voice.

"That is an absurd question," replied Beresford. "I know Mlle. de Monsigny very slightly. I saw her for a few days in Mentone, last winter,

and I have seen her for part of one evening here. Your thoughts travel far ahead."

"Still, you would give your soul to marry her," said she. "Have I not watched you with her? And she cares for you, too. I could see that when she looked at you during dinner. It is in her face and in her voice."

Mrs. Marlowe rose suddenly from her seat, and fell to walking up and down, in the moonlight, with her hands pressed to her cheeks.

"Oh, I am a foolish old woman, Tony!" she cried in a low voice. "And I am very nervous, and I am a little mad, I think, for I cannot bear to see you with that girl. I cannot bear to see you look at her as you do, and to see her flush and smile, and look into your eyes. I cannot bear to hear her lower her voice when she speaks to you, as a woman does for only one man in the world. Do you think I am mad? I—I cannot bear it! Listen! You told me, five years ago, that the rest of your life was mine to do with as I liked. You said that, by some horrible series of blunders, my name had been blackened forever, and that you were responsible for it, innocent though you were. You offered to marry me. You said you would never marry any one else. Oh, are you going to break your word now?"

The Honourable Mr. Beresford rose to his feet, and his face was very white in the moonlight—very white and drawn and tense.

"I have never broken my word in all my life," said he. "I offered, in all good faith, to marry you five years ago, and you refused and sent me away. I offer it again, in all good faith. It was through me, however innocently, that your life was wrecked, and to give you my life is the least I can do. I will marry you now, if you wish, though you know that I do not love you. I had no thought that you wished to hold me to my old promise, for we have seen nothing of each other in so long a time, and you had refused me once. But wait!" He turned upon her with a puzzled frown. "How can you wish to hold me to my promise if you mean to marry Lord Stratton? I am afraid I do not understand."

The woman threw out her arms with a little helpless gesture.

"Oh, Tony, Tony!" she cried. "Am I a man, to feel and reason by logic? Have I not told you that I was a foolish old woman, and nervous and overtired and a little mad? No, no, Tony, I must not marry you. We should not be happy together, you and I. We were never made to be together long, and you—you don't—care any

more. No, I must marry Lord Stratton, but—I cannot bear to see you with another woman. I cannot bear to think of you loving her. You will never understand, dear boy, because you are only a man. Oh, yes, I am a little mad. Don't mind me. Don't listen to me. I'm mad and foolish, and—and jealous, a jealous old woman who—who can't altogether forget. Tony, Tony, a jealous old woman!"

And just then Lord Stratton came out upon the terrace.

"Mme. de Brissal is much better," said he. "She has these spells of giddiness rather often. They are not dangerous. I am very sorry to have had to leave you. Isabeau will be out in a moment."

CHAPTER V

CHAPTER V

When Beresford came down the next morning there was no one in the breakfast room. One of the servants told him that Monseigneur and Milor de Strope had just finished, and that mademoiselle had breakfasted very early—before any one else. Madame and Mme. Marlowe were not yet down.

He breakfasted alone, and then went out into the sunlight. The air was soft and fresh and cool, and full of all sweet summer odours—roses from the gardens, and mignonette and heliotrope and geraniums—the acrid scent of firs from the grove which hid the avenue on its way to the gates, damp earth and growing things from the fountains and the lagoon below; and, over it all, the wonderful clean freshness of dew not yet dried by the mounting sun. Birds cheeped and sang and rustled among the trees or under the shrubbery, and down beyond the stables somewhere a cow lowed.

The Earl of Strope was coming up the avenue from the stables. He was in breeches and an old

shooting jacket, and he wore a very ancient deer-stalker's cap.

"Morning!" said he. "Shocking hour to get up! When I was of your age I used always to be up by six."

"Yes?" said young Beresford politely. "I think I remember my father telling me something of the sort about himself. He used to tell it me very often. I dare say that when I'm past middle age I shall say the same thing to all the young men I know. It must be a great comfort to look back upon an exemplary youth."

The old gentleman laughed and worked his great white eyebrows up and down.

"You have no reverence for age," said he. "You're like all the other young people nowadays. Only you are stronger. I really should like to know which of us is the stronger. We shall have a good opportunity to find out here. You must stop a long time. Would you like to come down to the dairy? I have a calf which I am lifting each day with my arms to test the truth of the old adage. They say, you know, that if you lift a calf each day from the time it is born, you should be able to lift it when it is a cow. It would be interesting at least to find out when one

would reach one's limit. My calf is quite a heifer now but I still can lift it."

They went down the smooth, well-kept drive, past the stables where a pair of English grooms were polishing harness in the sunlight, and through the dairy houses to a small paddock where two or three half-grown calves stood fighting flies in a patch of shade. The pasture beyond was dotted red and white with grazing cattle.

"That is the one," said the Earl, pointing to a white heifer of mild aspect. He put a hand in the pocket of his jacket, and the heifer came up to him expectantly.

"I should have thought it impossible for any man to lift that animal in his arms," said Beresford. The old Earl laughed.

"I shall prove that it is not," said he, giving the heifer a bit of sugar. He stepped to the animal's side and put both arms under its body, planting his strong feet well beneath it. Then he lifted it till its hoofs hung several inches from the ground. The heifer turned a mildly protesting face and licked his ear with a sugary tongue.

"By Jove!" said young Beresford. "I'll do that or die in the attempt. Will you give the poor beast some more sugar?"

"I hope you will fail," said the old gentle-

man, chuckling. "I shall tell everybody in the house."

Beresford tugged desperately at the heifer and, much to his surprise, duplicated the Earl's feat.

"Haven't you something really difficult?" he inquired loftily. "This is mere child's play. I wish, though, that when the beast is full grown and you are still lifting it you would ask me down here to look on. I should thoroughly enjoy seeing you embrace a large white cow. There is a certain humour in the picture."

The Earl growled.

"What do you think of that woman who's stopping here?" he demanded abruptly, as they were returning through the dairy—"that Mrs. Marlowe?"

"What do I think of her?" repeated Beresford defensively. "Oh, I don't know. I've not had much of a chance to judge, have I? She is undeniably a handsome woman, and I should fancy she might be an entertaining one. Why do you ask?"

"I don't like her," said the Earl, with his accustomed frankness. "She has frightened eyes. She has done something bad, sometime or other. And she's afraid of being found out."

Beresford laughed.

"What a detective you would make, sir!" said he. "Now, I dare say the poor woman has merely had an unhappy life. Grief often makes a woman's eyes look like that. After all, the mere fact that she is a widow is reason enough."

"It's not grief," declared the old gentleman stubbornly. "It is fear. I know fear when I see it. And what's more, I think she means to marry my son. That would be a great folly."

"It might be a great happiness," submitted Beresford.

"A great folly," repeated the Earl. "The silly boy is afraid of being lonely in the event of Isabeau's marrying. As if he would not still have me! I don't like the woman. I should oppose, with all my strength, any such notion as his marrying her. I don't wish him to marry again, anyhow. There is no need of it. Alfred, my other son, has two boys. The succession is assured. I need Richard to bear me company. He's a fool to think of marrying!" And the old gentleman shook his head angrily, and shrugged his great shoulders, as if he would have done with a disagreeable topic. "I am going down to the lagoon to see about replacing a bit of loose stone," he said. "Will you come?"

"Why—er, thanks," said young Beresford. "Thanks, I should like to go, but I—I think I see mademoiselle up in the rose gardens, yonder. Perhaps I'd best just speak a word to her, and join you a bit later."

"Oh," said the Earl. "Yes, yes, of course! Of course!" But he did not at once start away. He hesitated a moment, frowning absently under his great white brows.

"Old men have strange notions from time to time," he said at last. "Sometimes they feel coming events rather oddly. I have a strong feeling that something is going to happen here at Monsigny—that there are events of moment afoot. I am glad you are with us. You are more of a man than most men. Yes, I think something out of common is going to happen, and I believe that woman will have a part in it." Then he turned away, and went down the long slope toward the lagoon, his great shoulders swinging as he walked and his hair gleaming white under the old deer-stalker's cap.

Beresford stood looking after him thoughtfully.

"I should say that you are very likely right, sir," said he, under his breath. "The air is a bit thick, and air has a way of clearing itself. I wonder——" He had a momentary impulse to

follow the old gentleman and, in spite of his promise of the night before, tell him the truth as he knew it regarding Mrs. Marlowe and that lady's unfortunate past, and his own connection with the affair. He saw that the Earl was very decidedly opposed to any idea of his son's marriage to the woman, and he foresaw trouble and possibly unfortunate disclosures if it should come to a clash. But the habit of keeping his word, even in the smallest matters, and a natural distaste for meddling, held him silent. He turned about toward the garden with a little sigh. "'Something is going to happen here at Monsigny,'" he repeated. "I should say that you were very likely right, sir." And he shook his head gloomily.

The rose gardens lay to the west of the château. There were hedges of box and of laurel about them, and down at the farther end, for the great rectangle sloped gently away, were rows of glass hothouses for forcing the flowers in winter and spring. On the side opposite to the avenue there was a little rustic summer-house, open to the air but masked about by lilac trees, and a row of these lilac trees stood all along the high stone wall that shut out the cold winds from the north.

Beresford found a gap in the hedge and made

his way in between two of the long straight rows of bushes that drooped under dew-wet rose-buds. The air was heavy with fragrance—almost stupefying. Some one in a soft white gown that clung to her when she moved—under a great drooping white hat that shaded all her beautiful head—stood still, up to the waist in roses.

"*Bon jour*, monsieur," said some one, very low, and made a little courtesy down into the roses.

"*Bon jour*, mademoiselle," said the Honourable Ashton Beresford. "Do I intrude?"

"*Du tout*, monsieur!" said she. "We are honoured, the roses and I. What have you been doing with my poor old *grandpère*, monsieur?"

"I have been lifting a calf," said Beresford. "A white one." There were choked sounds under the big hat.

"It is nothing to laugh at," he said with dignity. "It is a feat. You couldn't have lifted the calf," he boasted.

"Me? I couldn't lift even a wee little calf," confessed the girl humbly. "It seems such an odd way to spend a morning, though—lifting calves. Do you always do it?"

"No, I don't," said he; "but your poor old *grandpère* does, so you needn't be proud."

"Ah, well, I dare say the calf likes it," she conceded handsomely. "I *should* have loved to see you, though!" And she made further choked sounds.

Beresford rudely pushed aside the rose-bushes and came into the path where she was standing. She looked up into his face and the blood beat at his temples.

"I'm not—so afraid in the sunshine," said he to the purple eyes. Then he was granted an extensive view of the top of the big white hat. It was really a very handsome hat—as hats go.

"You—you have not said how you liked my roses," ventured the girl, after awhile.

"Roses?" said he. "Roses? How is one to say that one likes roses? They are very beautiful roses—I dare say they are very proper ones. I don't know anything about roses. The only thing I can say of them is that they make the properest sort of a setting for you. What do you want to talk about roses for?" he demanded irritably. "I wanted to talk about you."

"Well, I didn't!" said Isabeau de Monsigny with a certain haste.

"What was it you—wished to say about—about me?" she inquired presently of Mr. Beresford's back.

"I've forgotten," said he brutally. "It makes no difference, anyhow. You weren't interested."

"Oh, very well!" said the girl, and cruelly maltreated an innocent rosebud that had never done her any harm. Then, in a moment, she met Beresford's eyes and they both laughed—consumedly—for they were young and the morning was a cup of wine and God was in His heaven and all was right with their world.

Beresford threw back his head and drew a long deep breath of the rose-laden air. A little flush came up over his cheeks.

"I take it back!" he cried. "I lied. Oh, mademoiselle, I lied! I hadn't forgotten. I wanted to tell you——" His eyes, looking into hers, shifted a trifle and went beyond her, over her shoulder to the upper end of the gardens, where a strip of green turf, raised in a narrow terrace, lay close under the walls of the château.

"Ah-h!" said he, and at his tone Isabeau raised her eyes to his face and followed the direction of his gaze.

"Ah!" said the girl; and her tone, like his, had changed. "There is Mrs. Marlowe," she said reluctantly. "I suppose I should ask her to come down and see the gardens, shouldn't I? One must be polite to one's guests, mustn't one?"

"I don't fancy you need bother just now," said Beresford. "Lord Stratton is coming out to join her."

"Oh, yes, yes, of course," said the girl slowly. "Father is with her, isn't he?" And she looked, watching the two, as she had looked the evening before when she watched them across the dinner table—a bit puzzled and a bit thoughtful and a bit disturbed.

"Shall we go over to the little summer-house?" she said presently. "The sun is growing just a bit warm here. It is cool in the summer-house, and shady and comfortable, and one is higher up. One can see all the gardens."

So they crossed over between the straight ranks of rose-bushes, to the other side of the garden, where the tiny rustic summer-house stood among its lilac trees, under the cool shade of the wall. And Beresford said no word as they went, for the sight of the two people up by the house had quite wrecked his mood, and had started his thoughts along unpleasant channels. He thought of what the old Earl had said so seriously but a few moments before, and he thought of the past evening, and of how Mrs. Marlowe had recalled his old promise and had broken out in a fit of woman's jealousy because he had talked with

Isabeau. It could not be that she seriously meant to hold him to his word—that she meant still to demand his allegiance. Her marriage to Lord Stratton, provided it went forward, must free him from all that. But what if she should not marry the Viscount? What if the old Earl should be able to prevent it, or she should determine not to go on with it? What if any one of a thousand obstacles should materialise? He would still be bound then! He had given her his life. What if she should refuse to give it back to him?

He clenched his teeth as he walked between the ranks of roses and said fiercely to himself that this was all preposterous nonsense. She could never take such an advantage. She was not that sort. What if she had given way to a little momentary spasm of jealousy—she had laughed at it herself. No, she was not that sort.

But, though he reassured himself very scornfully as his mind went over the thing, he could not rid himself of an odd discomfort—a premonition of danger to come. It was so, he thought, that the Earl must have felt when he said something was going to happen at Monsigny—something out of the common. And Beresford shook his head with a little sigh, for he knew that his happy,

contented mood of the morning was gone beyond recall. A film had come over the sunlight and the rose gardens.

There were chairs in the little summer-house, fashioned from gnarled and twisted branches, and a small rough table placed at one side. They sat down by the railing and looked out over the splendidly kept gardens with their hundreds of rose-bushes and, farther down toward the hot-houses, their beds and borders of other flowers —mignonettes and fuchsias and pinks and blazing geraniums. A vine of climbing rose had mounted the side of the summer-house and clung to the roof-posts, heavy with pink blossoms, and a spray of its buds hung by the girl's head, almost touching her hair. The colour, Beresford noted, was exactly the colour of her cheek, and the texture was like it, too. He thought of telling her so, but it seemed a very silly thing to say, even though it was true—very silly and very young, he thought; the sort of thing that one of the under-grooms might say to the gardener's pretty daughter of whom Isabeau had spoken the evening before. He was quite out of humour with compliments.

The girl's eyes still rested upon the two people up under the walls of the château, and

they were still thoughtful and a bit disturbed. When the two rounded the corner of the west wing and disappeared, she turned about to Mr. Beresford with a little sigh.

"I suppose it is very, very rude and very improper not—not quite to—like one of one's own guests, isn't it?" she inquired deprecatingly.

"Very!" said he by way of encouragement.

"And yet," she went on, "do you know, I can't quite like her—Mrs. Marlowe, you know. I never could, not even in Nice. There's something about her—oh, I don't know." She looked away over the gardens, but Beresford could see that the colour heightened the least bit in her cheek. "Father—likes her—I think. Perhaps I don't know her well enough—I think it's something about her eyes."

"Ah!" said young Beresford, "that is very odd."

"Odd? How?" she demanded, turning back to him. "What do you mean? How is it odd?"

"Oh, nothing," said he, "nothing at all. I was thinking of what some one else had said about a woman's eyes. Yes, as you say, Lord Stratton seems to like her. I—noticed last evening at dinner. Well, she is handsome, is she not? And she is probably very entertaining."

The girl looked up into his face with a certain diffident curiosity.

"Had you ever met her before last evening?" she asked.

Beresford hesitated for the fraction of a second.

"I do not remember," he said carefully, "ever to have met any Mrs. Marlowe before. Of course one meets no end of people and quite forgets them. It is not a common name, I should think, though hardly extraordinary. Why do you ask?"

"Oh, nothing," said the girl, looking away again. "Last evening, when you were presented, I thought—just for a moment, you know—oh, nothing, nothing at all! Let us talk about something else. I really must not sit here discussing one of our own guests. What shall we talk of, monsieur?"

"There is you," suggested Mr. Beresford, dispassionately.

"No," said she, shaking her head, "I will not be talked about. We shall talk about you. Why have you turned all at once so grave and stern and—and bitter-looking, monsieur, with your lips all in a hard little straight little line—so! A few moments ago, down among the roses, you were—you were—different."

"Ah, mademoiselle," said he, "that was in tne sunshine and among the roses. It is shadow here. There is a difference—somehow. And I have been thinking of things—that were unpleasant. The sun does not shine everywhere, mademoiselle."

But the girl put out her hand with a quick gesture and touched his arm. Her eyes were wide and distressed.

"Ah, monsieur," said she very low, "come back into the sunlight! If the sun does not shine everywhere one may still go where it shines. I —I cannot bear to see any one unhappy or in— trouble. Is it just black butterflies, monsieur; *papillons noirs*, or is it great trouble? Ah, I would have sunshine always for everybody! I should die without the sun, I think. Am I very, very foolish, monsieur?"

"No, mademoiselle," said Beresford gently, "you are very, very wise; and it is only *papillons noirs*—not a great trouble." He stopped to shake his head at her humorously, and he gave a little whimsical laugh.

"Fancy anybody thinking of his troubles, with you about!" said he.

"I might be one of his troubles myself," suggested Mademoiselle de Monsigny. "Then he'd have to think of me to be polite. Am I

one of your troubles, Monsieur Beresford?" she demanded.

"You are," sighed young Beresford. "You're a great trial to me. You kept me awake half of last night."

"Oooh!" said she sorrowfully.

"But I'll forgive you," he went on, "for it was no fault of yours. You can't help it, can you, if presumptuous young men dare to lie awake thinking about you."

"What was this particular presumptuous young man thinking?" inquired Mlle. de Monsigny rashly.

A sudden little flash came upon Mr. Beresford's face and his voice mounted. "What did he think?" he cried. "Ah, I'll tell you what he —no, hang me if I will! No, I'll not tell you what he thought, mademoiselle," and he refused to meet her eyes.

"I thought of your wit and beauty," he mocked presently, when his voice was once more quite calm, "but chiefly of your hair. Where did you get your wonderful pale hair, mademoiselle? There was never any like it in all the world. And where did you get your purple eyes? You know, do you not, that they call you the most beautiful woman in Europe."

"Then," said the girl decidedly, "they talk very great nonsense, for I have seen many women who are infinitely more beautiful than I am. My hair is a great trial to me. It is tow colour, monsieur—no colour at all. I got it from Yvonne de Morlaix, who was an ancestress of mine, a Bretonne. Two or three others of the family have had it since. Me, I do not like it. I wish I had my mother's hair, as I have her eyes. It is tow!"

"It is no such thing!" cried young Beresford, indignantly. "Tow, indeed! It is the very soul of gold with all the cheap yellow taken away, and just a creamy tinge of colour left to make it warm and alive. You should see it in the sunlight! Tow! Have you a portrait of this Yvonne de Morlaix?"

"Yes," said the girl, "but it is a very crude and poor one. Would you like to see it? It is in the west gallery with the others. There is a very beautiful portrait of my mother by Carolus Duran. I should like you to see that. Come, we will go up to the house now."

They left the little summer-house and went up through the gardens by a gravel path which ran under the stone wall. Isabeau carried a great armful of long-stemmed pink roses which she had

cut. And they entered the west wing of the château and made their way through suites of high, splendid state apartments, shuttered and darkened, the furniture and the mirrors covered with white linen, to the long picture gallery where the portraits of the Marquis de Monsigny and of their wives and of their children hung in double rows.

Isabeau rolled the shades away from the skylight by cords which hung at hand, and led Beresford to the portrait of Yvonne de Monsigny, *neé* de Morlaix. It was, as she had said, a crude work, and did probably scant justice to the charms of the Bretonne who had been won in so summary a fashion to the house of Monsigny; but with all its old-fashioned stiffness it was undeniably beautiful, and the painter had reveled in his depiction of the strange pale hair.

"Yes, it is beautiful," said young Beresford, "but you took little else than the hair from Yvonne de Morlaix, mademoiselle. She was pale, but you have a very pink skin, and she had fair eyebrows, but yours are dark, and she had a weak chin. I do not like people with weak chins. May I see the portrait of your mother?"

"It is at the other end of the gallery," said Isabeau; and, as they went along, she pointed

out three other women of the family with the Bretonne's ashen hair.

"That one is Jeanne de Monsigny, who married a Duc de'Angoulesme," said she. "And that is Marie Charlotte, who died a week before her wedding day, and that is Amélie, who married a Marchese di Sant 'Agata."

Then they came to a great portrait in a wide gold frame which seemed a window or a doorway, for the woman pictured there was living and breathing, smiling at one through the opening in the wall. She sat upon a gray-and-gold couch of the Louis Quinze style, and she was leaning forward, in her white silk gown, with one arm laid along the back of the seat, and the other resting across her lap. She faced you, chin tipped up a little, smiling. Her arms and shoulders were bare, and there was a single pink rose, half opened, at her breast.

Beresford stepped backward with a quick little smothered cry. Save for her yellow golden hair the woman in the picture might have been painted with absolute fidelity from the Isabeau whom he knew. The likeness was amazing.

"You are all Monsigny, mademoiselle," he said, after a long time. "There is no Stratton about you." It was what her father had said to the

old Earl, years before, as they stood on the south terrace and watched her rolling about in the dust with her puppy.

"Yes," said she, "I am all Monsigny. They say I am very like my mother, and I suppose it is true. I am going to the chapel now, to put these roses on her tomb. I take them there every day. Would you like to go with me?"

"Thank you," said he simply, "I should like very much."

They went back through the great darkened state apartments, and along many dim corridors with doors upon either side, through what seemed to be the oldest portion of the château, and so into a little irregular court, flagstoned and surrounded on all sides by the crenated and time-stained walls of the building. Gargoyles grinned from the eaves, and a quaintly wrought pointer of iron stood out from one of the walls, throwing a finger of shadow upon the sun-dial chiseled into the stone. In the centre of the court there was a very ancient well, long disused, with a curb of worn graystone and a rusted crank of iron for raising the bucket. Little brown lizards were sunning themselves upon the curb.

They crossed the court and entered the gothic porch of the chapel. Ivy covered it almost

completely, and hung in festoons across the opening. The girl unlatched the heavy little oaken door and went in.

Inside, the chapel was very cool—almost cold, in spite of the summer heat without, and the air smelled of incense and burned wax and of dry decay. It was gloomy, for the few windows were of stained glass—heavy blues and scarlets and greens. From the rose window over the doors, which faced the south, beams of light slanted down through the dim air and fell in prismatic lozenges across the flagstone pavement and across the heavy pillars and upon the sculptured tombs which stood on either side of the chapel. The hanging lamp before the altar gleamed, a tiny red spark in the shadows, like a lighthouse far away at sea.

And under the great stone arches at the two sides the tombs of the Marquis de Monsigny stood bravely arow, each with his Marquise beside him. Their sculptured effigies in armour or in robes of office lay upon the covers, hands folded, eyes closed, feet toward the nave; and a little scroll at the foot of each tomb told, in phrases of sonorous Latin, who each man was and the deeds he had done. Pray for him!

But there was one tomb which stood alone,

" . . . knelt down beside the tomb and said a little prayer for the soul of her mother "

with an empty space beside it. It bore no effigy upon its cover, only sculptured wreaths and vines and flowers; and four little caryatides, cupids, upheld it at the four corners. There was a cluster of living roses upon the tomb, yesterday's roses, scarcely withered in that cool, dark place.

The girl took away the flowers, laying in their place the ones she had brought, and she bent her knee, looking toward the high altar, and knelt down beside the tomb, and said a little prayer for the soul of her mother. Beresford stood near, by one of the gray pillars, watching. It gave him a curious and very sweet sense of intimacy to see her so—to feel that she had allowed him, indeed, of her own accord asked him, to come here with her. He watched the soft curve of her cheek against the dark, the gleam of her wonderful hair in the shadow—the soul of gold, he had called it —all the beautiful strong young lines of her body as she knelt beside the tomb; and a great passion of tenderness and of love took hold upon his heart and shook him from head to foot—a great passion of love such as comes to strong natures only, and it swept away in its fierceness all doubts and fears and promises, all dangers and difficulties—keen as physical pain, and solemn as the ancient place in which he stood. He bent his head to it and

bowed his great shoulders in a sort of grave, awed wonder.

And when they came out at last into the warm sunshine of the little court he was very silent, with a certain new look in his eyes which turned the girl's cheeks to a deeper pink as she met it.

CHAPTER VI

CHAPTER VI

On this same morning Lord Stratton found Mrs. Marlowe in the breakfast room, finishing her late meal alone.

"Oh, dear!" said she plaintively, "I know this is a dreadful hour. I suppose all the others of you have breakfasted long ago, but I am habitually lazy. I shall make no attempt to conceal it. I'm an owl, Lord Stratton—I like to stop up till unseemly hours of the night, and sleep till an unseemly hour in the morning—if not till noon itself. Are you quite disgusted with me?"

Lord Stratton sat upon the arm of a chair and smiled across the table at her, the good, frank, hearty smile of a man who is habitually grave.

"I am not disgusted at all," said he. "I am amused. You shall get up at any hour you like while you are at Monsigny. I dare say your passion for stopping up of nights is the result of having been made to go to bed early when you were a child. I have known people who spent their lives in conscientiously doing all the things they were not allowed to do as children. They

took a certain evil delight in it. However, if you will come out-of-doors with me, I will make you genuinely sorry that you were not up hours ago. It is a very beautiful morning."

They went out upon the terrace, and Mrs. Marlowe breathed in the freshness and the mingled summer odours with a little cry of delight.

"I *am* sorry!" she said. "I really am sorry—but I expect I shall be quite as late to-morrow. An old woman doesn't change her habits easily. Oh, isn't everything beautiful!"

"You do not look an old woman," said Lord Stratton, laughing a little. "You look a very young one. I have been told that old women, or semi-old ones, dare not face the morning light. If I am a judge, the morning light becomes you."

"I am six-and-thirty," said she, "and that is old age. Don't flatter! You are such a grave and convincing person that one always believes what you say."

"Six-and-thirty?" said he. "God bless my soul, I am fifty!"

"Oh, a man!" she scoffed. "A man may be a boy at fifty. He is most certainly a boy till thirty, and sometimes later. But a woman! Save us! She's different. Where does all this

scent of roses come from? Are there gardens near?"

"There are rose gardens at the west," said he. "Shall we walk around the west wing of the château? One has a very good view of them from close under the walls, for the ground slopes away."

They skirted the great west wing and came out upon the narrow terrace of green turf. The gardens swept away from under their feet to the hothouses that winked and glittered in the sun, far below.

"There is some one down among the roses," said Mrs. Marlowe—"two people. Ah, it is Isabeau and—and Ton—and Mr. Beresford." Her tone had changed very suddenly, but Lord Stratton was watching the two young people, and did not heed it.

"Yes," said he, "yes, it is Isabeau and Ashton Beresford."

"He—seems very devoted," she murmured, and again he did not heed her tone.

"It is as I would wish," he said presently. "There is no better man. He shall have my consent if he can win hers."

"And—" said the woman, "and his old entanglement, the story you told me of? You are—

you are not—afraid?" Her face was turned away, and it writhed and twisted so beyond her control for an instant that she was frightened.

"No!" cried the Viscount stoutly. "No! He is innocent of any wrong or of any meanness. I'll swear it. I know the man. He may be Quixotic but he would never be dishonest. Ah, they have gone to the little summer-house where it is shady! Come, shall we walk? Let me show you the fountains down below the south terrace. It is cool under the bank. On the hottest days one may be cool there. Come!"

They walked back to the south wing of the château and crossed the avenue and went down the curving steps of marble that disappeared ahead of them into a thicket of green shade—firs overhead, shrubbery and ivy beneath. So they came to the first terrace where the great Nereid fountain was, with its long, still pool before it and its sculptured marble wall all stained and moss-grown, behind. And they went in along the stone coping of the pool, in near to the splashing fountain, and found a cracked marble seat overgrown with ivy.

The trees stood close together, and under them spreading shrubs. Vines and bushes hung from the bank above, making the place almost a grotto.

It was dim and very cool, for the sun never came here, and the mossy earth underfoot was black and damp. Through the vines and low-hanging boughs they could see, as they sat, glimpses of the formally laid out esplanade, where it swept down to the valley, and of the blue lagoon at its foot. Two or three men were busy at the near edge of the lagoon, repairing, it would seem, the stone margin. Among them towered the great shoulders of the old Earl.

Mrs. Marlowe sank back in her seat with a little sigh of restful content, and half closed her eyes.

"Ah, it is all so beautiful and peaceful and idyllic here, my friend," she said in her slow, lingering tones. "It is like old tales, romances of another day, a story-book Eden of marble and green things and antiquity and peace. It is like one's dreams of fairy-story castles. Yes, peace —peace beyond telling! I have not had much peace. Oh, do you not dread leaving it? Could you be happy anywhere else after this? I should think you would want to imprison Isabeau in a convent to avoid ever having to leave Monsigny."

Lord Stratton leaned forward, with his eyes fixed upon the plashing water and the intertwined figures of the marble group. He chafed his hands together absently as he stared.

"I should dread ever leaving Monsigny, as you suggest," he said slowly—"and indeed in a way I do dread it—if it were not for—for a certain dream I have of late been dreaming about—another sort of happiness, a happiness which does not depend upon place nor environment, which goes with one wherever one moves. I have dreamed, I wonder if it is foolishly, that my life is not yet lived, that there might still be much in it beyond an old man's portion of loneliness and oblivion. I am only fifty, and I am not old for those years. I wonder—I wonder—I——" His voice stammered and trailed away into silence. He had been speaking very gravely and thoughtfully and low, as if quite to himself, and he seemed not to notice when he ceased to think aloud.

So, for a long time neither of the two spoke, but the woman sat quiet in her place, pale and wide-eyed, with a certain very curious expression upon her face, and Lord Stratton stared at the laughing Nereids, and softly chafed his hands together.

Then at last, a little restless movement and a sigh from Mrs. Marlowe seemed all at once to rouse him. He sat up with a jerk, like one wakened from sleep.

"I—I beg your pardon," said he. "I—am very rude. I fear my wits were wandering. I have lived so much alone that sometimes I—forget." He turned about on the old stone bench to see her the better, and his face was gentle and somehow greatly softened. It was as if he had grown, all in a few moments, much younger—had laid off the sternness and hard grimness that grief and time had carved upon him.

"A little while ago," said he, "you were saying that there had not been much peace in your life, and yesterday also you told me what, of course, I already knew in a vague way, that you had been very unhappy. Will you tell me something of your life? Will you make a friend of me? Believe me, I do not ask in idle curiosity! Sometimes it is a sort of relief to unburden one's griefs and sufferings to some one who is strong and safe and who cares to help one. I think you know that I—care greatly. I should like to make your life happier. Tell me what has been such a heavy load of suffering upon you, for I think it can have been no ordinary thing. How long have—have you been a widow?"

But the woman fell back in her seat, shrinking away from him, and her hands quivered and twitched, hiding her face.

"Oh, no, no! Oh, no, I—I can't! Don't—ask me anything!" she cried in a low choking voice. "I—can't speak of—of it. Don't ask me! Don't ask me!" She had spent many hours during the past five years in preparing for just such an occasion as this. She had often rehearsed what she would say, and with just how effective a degree of womanly sadness she would tell the plausible story; but, curiously enough, she had almost never had occasion to refer to her past. It had been understood, everywhere she went, that she was a widow who remained unconsolable over the death of her husband, and very few people had ever even mentioned her early life. So it was that she had fallen out of the habit of holding herself in hand, ready for the emergency. Also, the life of constant fear and dread which she had been through had sadly undermined her strength, and now she found herself in a nervous panic quite beyond her control, for the moment. But she gripped her hands and set her teeth very fiercely, calling up all her strength to the need, and after a little was outwardly calm again.

"Please—forgive me," she begged, and her voice still shook. "I—I am not very strong, and my nerves play me tricks—sometimes. What—

is it you would know? My—husband? He died nearly four years ago. He—he died under—peculiarly dreadful circumstances—not disgraceful—oh, not that! But very terrible. It was in—in India. I did not—greatly care for him—not as a man's wife should care, but his—his death was a very great shock. I—I try to think of it as little as—possible. I try to put all that—part of my life—behind me—to act as if it had not been. Do you understand? Surely you can see how I feel—— Ah, it was so dreadful, all of it, all of it!" She broke off, sobbing, and Lord Stratton laid one of his strong quiet hands upon her arm.

"Do not say any more, I beg of you," he protested, and his voice was gentle and pitiful. "I should not have asked you to speak of it at all. I—I did not know how painful it was to you. Do not think me guilty of mere curiosity. I have never been a curious man. I wished only to share the burden of your grief—to help you, if I might."

He rose from his seat and fell to pacing up and down the stone-edged margin of the pool, over the damp earth. "I am a lonely man, Mrs. Marlowe," said he gravely. "Even now I am lonely, with my daughter and my father to keep me company, and one day I shall be lonelier, for my daughter

will marry and my father will die. I said I had dreamed that my life was not done—that there might yet be more for me than an old man's portion. I wish to marry again, and there is but one woman, among all those I know, whom I would choose. I have not the great fresh love of a young man to offer her, for no one may love twice as I loved Isabeau de Monsigny, but all my care and strength and tenderness should be for her. It may be that I could make her very happy." He turned to face Mrs. Marlowe, and threw out his two arms in a little open gesture. "You are the woman," said he. "You are the only woman I should ever think of wishing to marry. Am I too abrupt, too plain spoken? Alas, I am a very simple man. It is many years since I have had occasion to use words of love, and they come awkwardly to my lips. I have no eloquence, no complexities of wooing to offer you, but I think I could make your life happier, and I am very sure that you could make me young again. Will you marry me?"

Mrs. Marlowe had leaned back in her seat once more, and her hands were pressed against her cheeks, but over them her eyes were very wide and sober, fixed upon the man's face. It had come earlier than she had expected, his proposal

of marriage, earlier even than she wished, for every woman, though she be a widow and has tasted great trouble, has yet in her a certain girlish coquetry, a certain instinctive reluctance to make her supreme surrender, though that surrender be sweet to her. She had no intention of refusing to marry the Viscount; indeed, as she had said to Ashton Beresford, she had come to Monsigny with the intention of marrying him; but, now that he had spoken, she found herself curiously unprepared, curiously unwilling to give him his answer.

She stretched out one of her hands toward him, and he took it between his.

"Oh, dear friend!" said she, looking up into his face, "give me a little time to consider. You take me by surprise—no, see, I will be quite honest with you! I knew that it was coming, this; I felt that you would speak to me sometime, but a woman puts such things off into the future. She is never ready to meet them when they come. Women are such foolish things! Do not press me to-day. Give me until to-morrow. I want to go off alone—oh, quite by myself—and think. You have done me a great honour. I must not treat it lightly, even to accept it. Will you let me be alone for awhile? I think I shall take a

long ramble over the fields and through the woods. I like to be out in the heart of nature when I have great things to decide. Will you let me be alone? Do not wait luncheon for me. I may be gone some hours."

Lord Stratton bent over the hand that he held and kissed it.

"I will wait as long as you choose," said he gravely. "I will not hurry you, though I must confess to much impatience. Your answer means a good deal to me—a great happiness or a great disappointment."

The sound of raised voices came up to them from the margin of the lagoon far below, made very faint and metallic by the distance. They turned to look. Two of the working-men who had been repairing the stone curb seemed to be having a most spirited discussion, enlivened by such gestures as only a Latin can accomplish. Then, in a moment, the great figure of the old Earl appeared from near by and seemed endeavouring to make peace. One of the fellows, who must have been greatly carried away by passion, would seem to have transferred his rage and his gesticulations to the newcomer, but the Earl's temper was somewhat widely celebrated. He seized the man by the throat with one hand

and by the scarlet sash with the other and, lifting him from the ground as one might lift a cat, threw him far out into the shallow water.

Lord Stratton laughed. "My father is not exactly a safe man to oppose," said he. Then, all at once, his eyes turned swiftly toward her face, and were met by her own. It was quite evident that the same thought had come to them both.

"He will learn to love you when he knows you better—as any one must," said the Viscount gently. "He is a rather grim old man. You must not mind his odd ways. Now I must go. It will seem very long to me till to-morrow."

He kissed her hand again and left her there by the fountain, and went up the marble steps to the avenue above. There were some small matters to be looked after at the stables, and he attended to these; and, after glancing idly into the dairy, strolled back toward the château. He felt very restless, curiously ill at ease, and none of the many usual modes of employing his time seemed to attract him. His mind was upon the dead Isabeau de Monsigny and upon that life of twenty years ago. He could not rid himself of the thought. nor call his attention to anything else.

It was rather naturally the result of the scene through which he had just passed—the speaking again, after so many years, of words of love to a woman, the awakening of a long-dulled heart to responsiveness to a woman's voice and look and touch. He had said to Mrs. Marlowe that he was a simple man, and it was very true. There was no complexity in him. He was like the old Earl in mind as in body, strong in likes and dislikes, plain of speech and single of view. He had loved Isabeau de Monsigny with a passion that was almost terrible in its single-hearted earnestness, and he had no thought that this new companionship which he sought should attempt to fill her place or in any way be to him what she had been.

Still, as he moved restlessly about the château upon this day, the image of his dead wife persisted strangely in his mind, and troubled him. He wondered if, after all, he had not been wrong in thinking of a second mariage—if there was not in it a certain disloyalty to the only woman he had ever loved.

He found himself, heedless of how he had come there, in the little irregular sun-bathed court at the north of the château, where were the old well and the sun-dial, and where gargoyles with

heads of beasts or of devils or of monks grinned hideously from the weather-stained eaves. He crossed to the ivied chapel and entered by the heavy little oaken door. The gloom and the incensed coolness of the place, the bars of coloured light from the windows, the ancient stillness, seemed good to him—restful and soothing.

He went and stood in the dim shadow by the tomb of Isabeau de Monsigny. It was covered with fresh roses of the deep pink that she had loved, and he knew that the younger Isabeau must have laid them there that same morning. He knelt beside the tomb and laid his arms out across its top, bowing his face upon them, and twenty years were rolled away like the rolling up of a curtain that masks the stage.

He was back again in those cruel, bitter days when the marble tomb beneath his arms was white and new, when all the world was a pall of cold horror, and life was ashes in the mouth. He had used to come here a great deal then, in the first keenness of his grief. He had used to come when all the servants were asleep and there was no one to spy upon him, and spend the night alone with her, talking to her as if she could hear through that heavy carven slab of stone.

It came back to him for an instant with a great

rush of agony, a tidal wave of bitterness and impotent rage at fate, and the sense of utter solitude, but he took firm hold upon himself with all his great calm strength, and shook it off, knowing that it was only a moment's breakdown of the nerves.

"Sweetest," he said aloud, "I wonder what you would have me do. I wonder what you would say if you could speak to me. If only you could speak to me! Sometimes I cannot bear the thought of any one taking your place in any respect. It is revolting. But she will not take your place, my queen. She will only bear me company as I grow old. You understand, do you not? I cannot love again and I cannot forget, and, when I am dead, they shall bring me here and lay me beside you as we agreed. But I am very lonely, Isabeau, very lonely! You would not begrudge me comfort and a woman's care?"

His voice echoed and rang in the dark, empty place, but he did not heed it, for he was very greatly in earnest. It was like him to come here, as it were to consult with the dead woman whom he had so loved. It was like his simple directness in all things.

"Show me some sign," he begged, still aloud. "Give me some signal if you think I am doing

wrong, if you think it disloyal to you. Oh, Isabeau, she will never take your place. I shall never love again as we two loved." And so he went on speaking, arguing, as it were, pleading, assuring, as if the woman heard in her marble tomb, till, after a very long time, his voice died away, and he dropped his face once more upon his outstretched arms, crushing the fresh pink roses that she had loved.

CHAPTER VII

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But Mrs. Marlowe, when Lord Stratton had left her, sat for nearly an hour, very quiet and still by the splashing fountain, and stared out over the terraced esplanade below her, to the wood and the blue hills beyond; so quiet that, after a time, a frog climbed out of the pool and sat upon the stone curb blinking at her, and birds fluttered down from the tangle of shrubbery to hunt for worms in the damp earth under her feet.

Below, at the edge of the lagoon, the Earl lingered a few moments, giving directions with emphatic nods of his strong white head. The woman shivered, involuntarily, as she watched him, this terrible old man with his uncanny strength and his fierce, piercing eyes that seemed to see the nethermost corners of her quaking soul. She was genuinely afraid of him, and she had a strange feeling of certainty that he was destined to work her ill. She shivered again as she recalled to mind his throwing the man into the water, and Lord Stratton's laughing remark that his father was not exactly a safe person to

oppose. She was quite sure that the Earl would oppose his son's marriage to her, and the thought of his antagonism filled her with an unreasoning terror.

But presently the Earl went away, and all but one or two of the working-men went away also, and she fell to thinking of Lord Stratton's offer and of the life which might lie before her if she should marry him. There was peace and quiet and rest—an end to this life of fear and of penury. There was happiness, it seemed to her, for she knew that Lord Stratton would be very kind; and indeed, she felt that any release from the life she had led would be happiness.

They would live quietly, she said to herself, sometimes here at beautiful Monsigny, sometimes at Strope Manor, though as little as possible, she thought, in England. There would always be danger there, the danger of recognition, and she was very firmly determined that Lord Stratton should never know about her past. Yes, he would be kind to her, she was certain of that, kinder than most men, and very thoughtful; and he would not demand too much, for he was not a young man nor demonstrative. And, sitting there in the cool shade, she made a very solemn vow to herself

that she, on her side, would be everything to him that a woman could be—that, in return for the many things he was offering her, she would use every means in her power to make him happy and contented.

"I can make him happy!" she cried softly to the birds and to the blinking frog and to the marble Nereids. "I know that I can make him happy, and, oh, I shall, I shall! I shall spend all my days, all my thought and strength in trying to make his life good to him. I shall be all he has, for of course Isabeau will——" Then all at once she halted with a little catch of the breath, and something took hold of her heart and wrung it.

"Isabeau will—marry—Tony Beresford," she whispered slowly. "She will marry—Tony." She sprang to her feet with a little low cry that sent the birds and the inquisitive frog back to their coverts in a panic. Her hands shook and clenched at her sides, and her face quivered.

"She shan't marry him!" cried the woman fiercely. "She shan't marry him! It would drive me mad to think of them—of them, married! He—swore that I should have all his life. He's breaking his word. Oh, I dare not think of them married! I dare not." She dropped

back into her seat, with her face in her hands, sobbing.

"Tony, Tony!" she cried in a whisper, "you—must not do it. I've borne a great deal from the world: I can't bear any more. To see you forget—altogether, to see you making love to another woman, to see her listening, to know what you are saying to her when I cannot hear, to think of you—of you married to her. Oh, Tony, I can't bear it! I suppose I am a wicked woman," she said after a long time, dropping her hands listlessly into her lap and staring out again to the blue hills. "I suppose I am a wicked woman. I have nearly wrecked a man's life—a man whom I—whom I loved, and now I wish to wreck it altogether just for—jealousy. Yes, that is it, just jealousy,"—her hands clenched again, instinctively, and she caught her lip between her strong white teeth—"a jealousy so fierce that it burns me when I think of it, sends little dagger things all through me! I'd—oh, I'd commit crimes rather than let you marry that girl, Tony! I'd do anything, anything. It frightens me to feel so, to know that I've so little control over myself. Ah, Tony, Tony, this love, it's a strange thing! And women are queer cattle, aren't they, boy? They'll do more for their love than you men.

I am a wicked woman! I had not known how wicked. I've tried so hard not to be! It isn't that I want to be bad, but there's something goes mad inside me when I think of you loving any one else. Ah, why did I not marry you, years ago, Tony? Maybe we should have been happy together. I think not, but maybe we should have been." And she fell to staring out into the distance, with her hands clasping and unclasping and twisting about each other on her knees.

Then, after a time, she rose and took up her broad hat which had fallen beside the bench, and went out upon the open terrace where the steps led down toward the lower esplanade with its little fountains and urns and geometrically laid out shrubbery, and to the broad lagoon. She went slowly down the steps and through the curving gravel paths to the water's edge, and she turned to glance backward, up the splendid vista to the château which crowned it all. There was no one in sight; the labourers, who had been working beside the lagoon, were gone, and the old Earl was gone, also.

She turned to the left, skirting the pond, and walked, at a leisurely pace, across the meadow at its western end and over some little sparsely

wooded hills beyond. She saw the stables and the dairy houses far at her left, and the wide pasture dotted with grazing cattle, red and white and black and soft tan, but she held on over the grassy rolling hills, across a little stream and along shaded paths; and the warm sweet summer peace of it all was balm to her.

She came upon a little old peasant woman in white cap and blue apron, gathering fagots beside a woodland road. The woman courtesied deeply. She was very much bent, and she had a sharp nose and chin that seemed trying to meet, and sharp cheek bones and bright little eyes that seemed to have no lids, but peered out between yellow folds of parchment skin. She called Mrs. Marlowe "Madame la Marquise."

"But I am not Madame la Marquise," said Mrs. Marlowe laughing. "I am only a visitor at the château. Poor thing! she is a little mad. There has been no marquise for thirty years." She took a piece of two francs from the wallet which hung at her girdle and put it in the dry, brown claw, but the old woman hobbled closer and peered up into her face, sidewise, like a bird. Her piercing gaze was so like the Earl's that Mrs. Marlowe shivered involuntarily.

"*Hé hé!*" said the little old woman, nodding.

"A great sin, Madame la Marquise, a great sin! It is in Madame's eyes. A great sin! Sins they are paid for here, then in hell, but here first. *Hé*, madame has done a great sin!" And she turned about and hobbled down the woodland road, clutching her bundle of fagots and shaking her head.

"Oh, here, too?" cried Mrs. Marlowe in a choking voice. "Shall I never escape it? Shall I never find peace?" And she dropped down upon a grassy mound under a tree, sobbing very bitterly.

So she wandered on, alternately walking and sitting on the grass under some tree, for a long while. She had lost all account of time and direction, save that she knew she was still within the walls of the vast estate. She had much to think about and a certain mental struggle to go through, so that, of the things about her, she took little heed.

"There is no use in trying!" she cried at last, and threw out her hands with a helpless gesture, as it were of surrender. "There is no use in trying. I cannot see him married to another woman—not that beautiful girl, anyhow. I shall do all I can to prevent it, and it will be the most contemptible thing that any woman

ever did." She sank down against a tree-trunk with a weary sigh.

"I've tried," she said aloud. "Oh, I've tried, but I'm not strong enough. I wonder if any one ever was so low. I—love him, and yet I would do anything in my power to wreck his happiness. I must be very, very bad, quite bad, and yet—I wish I were not. I wish I might be like other women, peaceful and dull and happy and—and good. Oh, good!"

It seemed to her that she heard very faint cries from a little way to the right. She was so absorbed in her own thoughts that, for a long time, she did not heed, but at last she sat up and listened. The cries were so incessant that they beat through her dulled consciousness. It might be only some wood-bird calling, but it sounded like a child in pain. At last she rose to her feet and followed the direction of the sound, for now she was quite certain that the faint cries were human.

A broad cleft in the earth, a ragged gully, zigzagged through the wood, a little way beyond. There were naked boulders and loose earth upon its flanks, and a tiny stream trickled along its bed. Mrs. Marlowe crept cautiously to the verge, lest the earth might give way under her, and looked

down. A little child of three or four years, in coarse peasant's clothes, was lying at the foot of the bank, about ten feet below. It would seem to have been playing at the brink of the gully and to have fallen upon the rocks beneath.

"The poor little dear!" cried the woman. "Oh, the poor little crushed, wounded thing!" She looked about for a better place to descend, and finally made her way to the bed of the ravine at the expense of bruised hands and soiled clothing. Then she hurried to the child's side.

One of his legs was doubled under him, and there was a cut on his cheek, and both his tiny hands were bruised and bleeding. She lifted him very tenderly and laid him upon a bit of soft turf nearby. The leg seemed not to be broken, but she thought that the ankle was sprained. The other cuts and bruises were of no great consequence. She dipped her handkerchief in the running water and washed the blood from the pale little face and from the bruised hands and knees. The child's great eyes followed her mutely and he moaned from time to time, but wept no longer, so that it was evident he was not in great pain.

"Ah, what shall I do for your poor ankle?" cried the woman. "It should be bandaged, but

I've nothing—wait!" She raised her gown and tore a great strip from the white skirt underneath. Then she wet it in the cold water, and, folding it so that the soft plain linen was underneath, with the lace and embroidery above, wrapped it about the injured leg.

The child cried out with the pain, and beat his hands feebly against her, but she finished the bandaging, and then threw herself down beside him, gathering his tiny hands into hers, and laying her face against his cheek.

"Oh, dearest, dearest!" she sobbed, "do you suppose I want to hurt you? Don't you know I had to? Don't you know that it hurt me a thousand times more than you? It went straight to my heart, every time you screamed. Poor little baby child, all alone and wounded so! Dearest," she whispered, "you might be *my* little child, *mine*, do you know? My very own! If only I had a baby of my own, to care for, to live for, to be good and brave and strong for, to hold close to me till I felt his heart beat, to watch in the night when he was sleeping! Oh, dearest, a woman with no child is such a pitiful thing! Such a lonely, mistaken, unnatural thing! If I had had a child like you, long ago, everything might have been different, do you know? So beauti-

fully, happily different! A woman could not be wicked with a little child to love. Ah, well!"

She rose to her feet and stood looking down the ravine, with her brows drawn together in thought.

"What shall I do?" she said. "I don't know where I am nor how far from the château. I wonder if there is a lodge near by that he might have strayed from. Surely he could not have come all the long way from the château. What shall I do?" She went back and knelt beside the child, who lay quite still, watching her with great wondering dark eyes.

"Oh, dearest!" said she, "what shall I do with you? I dare not leave you here while I go for help. Indeed, I should not know where to go, save to the château. Can't you tell me where to go? Who are you, dear? Is there a lodge or a cottage near by?" She had dropped into French, in the hope of gaining some information from the child, but he only stared at her, grave and unwinking.

"Oh, I must carry you, baby!" she cried at last. "I must carry you. It is the only way, and I am not very strong. Will you be very, very good, baby child, and not cry if I hurt your poor ankle?"

She brought more cold water from the stream,

holding her two hands like a cup, and she wet the linen bandage afresh, and bathed the child's feverish head. Then she gathered him up in her arms, and started down the ravine to a point where, she saw, would be the easiest ascent to the bank. The child cried out with the pain at first; but she kissed him and murmured to him in the soft mother tongue which is a tone and not a language, and she held him very gently against her, so that, after a moment, he fell silent once more and continued staring up into her face, solemn and still.

It taxed all her strength to gain the high bank with the injured child in her arms. Once she nearly fell, but at the top she sank down upon a great boulder and rested a little, till she had regained her breath. Also, she called aloud several times for aid, thinking that some one might be near, but out of sight in the wood.

"There is nobody about, baby," she said to the child. "We must get to the château, somehow." And her heart sank, for she was not a strong woman physically.

There was a little hill in a field close by the edge of the wood. It appeared to be the highest ground near, and she had the wit to take an observation from it, leaving the whimpering child at its foot.

"Oh, baby, baby!" she cried joyfully from the summit. "I can see the château! It is not more than a mile, I think. I must have come in a great semi-circle. A mile is not such a great deal. Courage, baby, we shall make it!" She gathered him up in her arms and set out bravely across the turf, but he was a heavy child, far too heavy for her to carry any distance, and, as has been said, she was not strong. She had to stop very often and lay him down, while she regained her breath and rested her aching arms and back. Also, the day was hot, for it was, by now, mid-afternoon, and the ground was, some of it, difficult—alternating bits of wood with open field, and once even a brook which she boldly waded, and where she stopped again to wet the child's bandage and to drink a little of the cold water.

"Oh—baby, but it's—harder than I—thought!" she panted. "You're such a heavy—baby! such a terribly heavy baby, and my poor—head is going round, round, round!"

Once she thought she must have fainted, for she came suddenly to herself and found the child before her on the turf, whimpering gently, and she herself was on her knees. "Courage, baby dear!" she gasped, and tried to smile down upon

him cheerfully, but the march had become a dreadful nightmare, in which strange-looking trees and boulders and miles and miles of green turf dragged themselves by under her unceasingly, and everything above the level of her eyes was black and noisy.

Then, when from a bit of high ground she had seen that she was near the pasture where the cattle grazed, when her knees shook under her helplessly, and the constant buzzing noise in the air had become almost unbearable, there came crashing in the undergrowth—she was among trees—and, of all men in the world, the Earl of Strope appeared.

The woman swayed weakly to her knees and laid the child on the ground before her—she nearly dropped forward across its body—and she fell to weeping, the tears of absolute exhaustion, nervous and physical.

"Eh?" cried the old Earl gruffly. "Who the devil are you? What the devil are you doing here?" and his heavy white eyebrows worked up and down like a gorilla's. He had been deep in thought, and, as often happens among old people, he was slow in coming to complete attention.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated.

"And what are you sniveling about? Stop it! Is that your child? Eh, what? You've been hurting it. It's all covered with bruises. Don't look so scared. You're always looking scared. I don't know who you are, but I've seen you somewhere before, and you are always looking scared. You've done something very bad. That's why your eyes look so. Get up, get up!"

"Oh, don't you know me? Don't you know me?" cried the woman. She remembered, in the midst of her exhaustion and faintness, what Lord Stratton had said about the Earl—that he was not always himself, that he had "spells," and she feared that he would do her or the child some harm.

"Don't you know me?" she repeated, turning her white face up to him. "I'm Mrs. Marlowe—Mrs. Marlowe! I am stopping at the château!"

"Eh?" cried the old gentleman, bending forward. "God bless my soul! So you are! What are you doing here? Whose child is that? You're ill, and the child is wounded. God bless my soul!"

"I was—walking," she said weakly, "and I found—the child—in a ravine. He had fallen and—and was hurt. I didn't dare leave him, so —I—carried him. I was—trying to reach the

—château, but I'm—— Oh, I'm so tired—so tired!"

The Earl bent over the child and looked at it carefully. He touched the bandaged ankle, and the child set up a wail of pain.

"It is one of the undergardener's children," he said. "It must have strayed. There is no great hurt, save for the ankle." Then he paused and stared at the half-fainting woman.

"You have carried that heavy child all the way from the ravine?" he said slowly. "You have carried that child, *you!* By God, you are a plucky woman! It has nearly fagged you out, hasn't it? By God, you are a plucky woman! I should not have believed the thing possible. I have never liked you. There is something about you that I don't understand and don't trust, but I think you are the pluckiest woman I have ever met."

He took the child up and laid it in the hollow of his great left arm, as if it had been a kitten.

"Come!" said he. "Pull up all you can. It is not far to the château. Take my right arm and rest all your weight on it. If it is necessary, I can carry you easily." But Mrs. Marlowe, trying to rise to her unsteady feet, fell over all at once and fainted quite away.

Ten minutes later the grooms and working-men, gathered in a group before the stable door, were amazed to see the old Earl of Strope come striding in among them, bearing in his mighty arms a woman, apparently dead, and across the woman's body a whimpering, wide-eyed child.

CHAPTER VIII

CHAPTER VIII

THERE was little talk at the dinner table that evening of anything but Mrs. Marlowe's adventure with the undergardener's child, until that lady —who was of a genuinely modest temperament— was ready to leave the room for sheer embarrassment. She was still a bit pale, and looked tired about the eyes, but a long sleep since mid-afternoon had greatly recovered her from the exhaustion and nervous strain through which she had passed. Isabeau herself had met the Earl as he reached the château with Mrs. Marlowe in his arms, and had taken the fainting woman to her own rooms, and there kissed and wept over her, and rubbed her head with eau de cologne till she fell asleep like a tired child.

"I think I have never so misjudged any one," she said penitently to Ashton Beresford, at dinner. "I could not bring myself to like her. I don't know why. There was something about her that repelled me. But now—oh, I'm ashamed enough now. It was the pluckiest thing I ever knew a woman to do. She must have carried

that poor child more than a mile through the hot sun, and it was a very heavy child, too. Wasn't it splendid!"

"It *was* splendid!" said Beresford warmly. "She is a very brave woman. She probably saved the child's life. A stronger woman of different temperament could never have done it. Very nervous people of the frail type often accomplish surprising feats of strength. Where is Madame de Brissal to-day? Not ill, I hope."

"Ah, the poor dear!" said the girl. "Her fit of giddiness last night left her with a most dreadful headache that has lasted nearly all day. They are seldom so severe, her attacks. I must go up to her for a little while after dinner. You won't mind?"

"I shall mind a very great deal," said he, "and you know it, but of course you must go to her—only, come down again later!"

"I shall come down again," she said.

Beresford and the old Earl took their cigars down upon the avenue, and walked back and forth in the moonlight where the cool night breeze blew across their faces. Mrs. Marlowe and Lord Stratton lingered beside the little coffee table on the south terrace.

"I told you, Lord Stratton," said she, "that

I would give you my answer to-morrow. I think I will give it you now, for I am quite decided. I went off alone, to-day, to think it over, to look at it from every point, and before I found that poor wounded child I had made up my mind to marry you. You say that you are a lonely man, and I think you know that I am a lonely woman. We are neither of us very young, and we have not a great young love to offer each other, but I honestly think that we could be happy together, very happy and very contented, for I know that you would be infinitely kind to me, and I—oh, I should do everything, everything that a woman could do, to make you a good wife. I will marry you whenever you wish it, Lord Stratton."

The Viscount moved toward her swiftly, with a little impulsive boyish cry of gladness, but she put out her hand, laughing softly, to check him, and turned her head to where the two white shirt bosoms of the other men gleamed in the half light below, and the red ends of their cigars glowed and paled.

"Perhaps it would be better," she said, "not to —to tell them quite yet, but let them come to know me better. It will look so very sudden, will it not? They will be so unprepared."

"That shall be as you like," said he, "but I think I ought soon to tell my father. He—he may be a bit difficult to win over. He does not like the thought of my marrying again. However, you have done more to-day to influence him than all I could say or do. He admires nothing so much as pluck and bravery, and your bringing that great child home to safety has impressed him more than you know. Shall we join them, down there in the avenue? We have none of the moonlight here."

They went down where the two men were walking, and all four strolled slowly back and forth on the smooth white drive. Lord Stratton had, by chance, placed himself beside the old Earl, so that Mrs. Marlowe walked with Ashton Beresford.

"Let them get on a bit ahead, Tony," she said in a low voice, "I want to talk to you. So!—Ah, that is still better." A groom had approached the two men, coming from the direction of the stables, and evidently wished them to go there, for they turned half about, waving their hands toward Beresford and Mrs. Marlowe, and set off briskly with the servant.

"Now, come down below by the fountains," she said. "It is like daylight here." There was

a certain air of subdued excitement in her manner, but when they had descended to the lower terrace and stood in shadow by a stained old marble balustrade waist high, where, leaning, one looked down upon all the moon-bathed loveliness of the esplanade and the still lagoon, she seemed at a loss for words, and a curious shyness came upon her.

"I—I saw you this morning in the gardens with—*her*," she said at last.

"Ah?" said he pleasantly. "Oh, yes, yes, I was there. And I saw you up by the house with—Lord Stratton."

"Well, what of that?" she demanded with a little sharpness in her tone.

"What of it?" said he. "Why, nothing of it, at all, nothing more than of my being with Mademoiselle de Monsigny. Why did you feel called upon to mention that?"

But the woman made a quick little gesture in the dark. "Ah, we must not quarrel, Tony," said she. "We must not quarrel unless—unless we have to, not over little things, anyhow. Listen, Tony! I took a very long walk to-day, all alone, because I wanted to think out some things, decide them—fight a bit, maybe, with myself. And I came to a certain conclusion about—about

you and me. I tried to have it otherwise; oh, I fought hard, but—I'm only a woman, after all. Women are weak in some ways. Perhaps I'm weaker than other women. I have not been very happy. Ah, well, it's this. I won't give you up, Tony; I can't give you up. You—you must not marry that girl, nor, if you are honourable, make love to her—make her care for you. You made me a promise, long ago. You gave me your life. Well, I refuse to give it you back. That is all. I hold you to your word."

Beresford drew a very long deep breath, and, in the dark, she heard the great muscles in his arms and shoulders crackle gently as he took fierce hold upon himself and held himself rigid.

"Yet you intend, I believe, to marry Lord Stratton?" he said in a very quiet tone.

"I promised this evening to marry him," said she carelessly. Then, all at once, when it was too late, she caught herself up sharply, with a sudden gasp, for she had meant not to tell him of her engagement till she had wrung some sort of promise from him. Her mind was so intent upon the main line of her thought that the words had slipped out before she realised what she was saying.

"Ah!" said young Beresford slowly. "That would be a rather strange thing, would it not? Your holding me to such a promise—though for five years you have quite ignored it, and, only yesterday, refused to marry me—the while you were betrothed to another man. You are a curious woman, Margaret."

"I don't care, I don't care!" she cried tensely. "You may call me what you will, and think of me as you will. I'm as contemptible as you choose, but I cannot bear your making love to another woman! I would do anything—commit crimes, lie—anything to keep you from it! Oh, Tony, Tony, have you forgotten so completely? Is there nothing in me of the woman you—you used to—love? Yes, yes, you did, you did, if it was only a little! I knew it. I could see it! Am I not the same woman, Tony? Have I grown so old, so ugly, that there is nothing sweet in me now? Tony, you *can't* have forgotten!"

She stretched out her white arms to him along the marble balustrade and her voice shook in the beginning of little sobs.

Beresford saw that her arms, where they had touched the coping of the balustrade, were covered with bits of earth and little twigs and dust that soiled the soft, white skin. And he

took out his handkerchief and brushed them clean, with an exclamation of disgust. It made him think of something he had seen two or three years before in Africa. The hut of a Belgian trading agent had been looted and his wife and children killed. Beresford had been the first of the relief party to enter the door next day, and had found the woman lying upon her face on the floor. She had been dragged by the hair some little way, and her arms and one shoulder and the side of her face were smeared with earth. It had seemed to him more horrible, this disfiguring of the white, smooth flesh, than the actual wounds, and he had never forgotten it.

"I do not think you know what you are saying," he declared gravely. "You are about to marry another man. Surely that releases me altogether from my promise. You have had a very exhausting day, Margaret, and you are a bit nervous and hysterical. Shall we not leave all this till another time?—if indeed it must be spoken of. Of course, what you have been saying is quite out of the question."

"It is not out of the question," she cried, "and we will not put it off until another time. I definitely hold you to your promise."

"And I," said Beresford, "definitely refuse to

be held under such conditions. It is altogether absurd. What in Heaven's name are you going to do with me after you are married?"

"I won't release you!" she cried again, as if she had not heard him. "I tell you I cannot bear it. I have your promise, and I won't release you"

"It is war, then?" said he. "War, Margaret? I have the better hand, you know, if I choose to show it. No, no, do not let us be absurd! You have your coming marriage to think of. Do not try to interfere with me. Your engagement leaves me quite free to do what I will with my life."

But the woman came close to him in the dark, looking up into his face.

"Don't try me too far, Tony!" she said in a strained voice. "Don't try me too far. I warn you, you will be sorry. I—I told you that I should do anything, say anything, lie, commit crimes, to keep you from marrying that girl, and I shall if you refuse to listen to me. Ah, Tony, I am not responsible for myself when this jealousy takes me by the heart. I go almost mad. Take my warning—please, please! I beg of you. Don't drive me desperate. Oh, I know how absurd it all seems to you! You're only a man,

and you do things by reason. Women don't reason, Tony, they feel. I shall do something dreadful if you don't listen to me!"

Beresford made a little exclamation of impatience. He saw that the woman was becoming a bit hysterical, and, like all men, he hated scenes.

"Come!" said he. "We must be going back. It will look very odd, our disappearing so. We will talk this over to-morrow. Nothing can happen before then, you know."

They went back up the steps, silently, and out upon the avenue. There seemed to be no one on the terrace, but the two men were just coming up the drive from the stables.

"It was a horse which had fallen in its stall and injured a leg," said Lord Stratton to Beresford, as they met. "The grooms were a bit anxious, as the horse is a valuable one. I dare say it will come out all right. I am sorry that we had to leave you."

The old Earl had placed himself beside Mrs. Marlowe, apparently in a somewhat tardy attempt to make himself agreeable, so that they walked on ahead of the others, and after a turn or two mounted the steps of the terrace to sit down, while Lord Stratton and Beresford continued their stroll, back and forth in the moonlight.

Then, in five or ten minutes, Mrs. Marlowe rose and went into the château; and presently Beresford, seeing that Isabeau was not likely to appear, excused himself to write a letter which must be sent by the early morning post.

Lord Stratton mounted the steps of the terrace and sat down opposite the old Earl who was pouring himself a fourth cup of black coffee.

"I am going to marry Mrs. Marlowe," said he. "I know you will not be pleased, but I am a very lonely man and I want a woman's care. I am going to marry Mrs. Marlowe."

"You are not," said the old gentleman briefly, and poured a little cognac into his coffee.

"I say I am," declared the younger man. "She is a good woman and an attractive one. I think she will be a good wife. I think I shall be much happier married to her. She knows that I can never forget—forget Isabeau, and she will not expect a boy's passion. She will not expect to be to me what Isabeau was, but I think we shall be happy. After all, your opposition is more because the idea is new to you than for any other reason. You always oppose a thing until you have had time to grow accustomed to it."

"I do not believe that she is a good woman,"

said the Earl, ignoring the reference to himself, "and I do not believe you would be happy together. What do you know about her, anyhow?"

"I know that she is a widow," said Lord Stratton, "and I know that she has had an unhappy life. Further than that, I know that she is accepted in the best houses at Nice and Mentone, and even in Rome—among the Whites."

"Nice and Mentone!" cried the old gentleman in disgust. "Who knows anything about anybody in Nice and Mentone? And who is not received there? Your butler might set up for a baronet anywhere along the Riviera and no one would be the wiser. And as for the Whites in Rome, they are a set of Anglomaniac curiosity seekers. They will receive any one. Neither Rome nor Paris has any society nowadays. The Blacks are either dead or too poor to entertain, and the Faubourg St. Germain is the same. Who knows anything about this woman's husband?"

"He died in India, four years ago, as I told you this morning," said Lord Stratton.

"He did not," said the Earl. Lord Stratton uttered a little exclamation of impatience, then he laughed, for he was used to his father's way.

"When you told me this noon," continued

the old gentleman, "that Mrs. Marlowe's husband had died in India, I thought it very strange, for I remembered distinctly that Lady Eversham had told me, in Nice, the man died in America. Mrs. Marlowe had told her so. No, it could not have been a mistake. Lady Eversham is the most painstakingly accurate woman I ever knew, too much so altogether. I say, I thought it very strange, and so, this evening, a few minutes ago, I asked Mrs. Marlowe something about her husband, leading up to it in some gradual way, I have forgotten how."

Lord Stratton could not resist a short laugh. He knew something of the Earl's "gradual" leading up to a subject.

"I told her that I had heard he died in America, and, at first she said yes, then she became very confused and nervous and said no, it was in India, and that she was with him at the time. Now, I have been three times in India, as you know, and I asked her enough questions to make it quite clear that she had never been there. She lied about her husband's death, and lied very stupidly, too. She could easily have made up a better tale. I say, as I have said before, she is not to be trusted. She has done something very bad and she is afraid she will be found out.

You shall not marry her, anyhow, till we know much more about her earlier life. I dare say she never had any husband."

"That is quite absurd," said Lord Stratton warmly. "What you say is certainly odd, but I have no doubt she can explain it, and I have no doubt that she will, at the proper time. Anyhow, I won't have my guests cross-examined and frightened. You probably frightened her till she did not know what she was saying. We shall find out all that is necessary, you may be sure. You are too suspicious."

"I like her pluck," said the old gentleman, shaking his white head. "She did a fine thing to-day, but a man must ask for more than pluck in the woman he marries." Then, for awhile, they smoked in silence, each very thoughtful.

"Where is Isabeau to-night?" asked the Earl, rousing himself at last.

"With Mme. de Brissal," said Lord Stratton. "She said she would be down later, but I expect madame was restless and Isabeau could not come away. That is why Ashton Beresford went in so early. I think they are greatly taken with each other."

"I am very glad," said the old gentleman heartily. "He is a man—and that is rare in this

generation. I think he will make a good husband. He is not the light-minded or fickle type. He is almost as solemn as you or I. What was the trouble he got into a few years ago? I have forgotten."

"A divorce case," said Lord Stratton. "Colonel Travers—"Sudan" Travers. You knew him—got a divorce from his wife, and named Beresford. No one believed that Beresford was in fault—except Travers, I suppose. Beresford took it hard. It bowled him out seriously, I fancy. Queer case, as I remember it. Beresford shut up very oddly about a number of things that were charged. They had witnesses who swore to seeing Beresford about at places with the woman—hotels and the like. I don't believe it was true, but he would not deny it. Shielding the woman, I dare say. Probably there was another man in the business. Anyhow, I would trust the boy absolutely. You would, too, I think. If he wants Isabeau he shall have her—if she cares for him, and I think she does."

The old Earl rose, laying down the end of his cigar, and stretched his great arms till the muscles crackled. And he nodded his white head to the moon.

"I was telling Beresford this morning," said

he, "that something is going to happen here at Monsigny—something out of the common. I feel it more strongly than ever to-night. Something strange is going to happen. I wonder what it will be. Of one thing I am sure. That woman with the scared eyes will have a part in it. I tell you she is not to be trusted."

CHAPTER IX

CHAPTER IX

THE next two or three days passed, for every one at the château, under a pall of vague unrest. The air seemed charged with premonition, heavy with a sinister foreboding of ill, and they waited, ignorant of what was to come, but certain that something impended. The Earl's discomfort seemed to have become contagious.

Mrs. Marlowe and Lord Stratton were together during a great part of the day; but the woman was moody, full of strange whims, full of little bursts of affection and unexplained coldnesses—given to long fits of silence. Lord Stratton was frankly worried. He had opened again, with much delicacy, the old subject of her husband's death, and she had told him a story of some length about the occurrence, with no sign of nervousness, dwelling upon its unusually horrible circumstances and her consequent dread of recalling it to mind. But even to Lord Stratton's simple and unsuspicious ears the tale rang false and unconvincing. He would not, for the world, have admitted to himself that he did not believe it, but it troubled

him greatly and made him very unhappy. He took to spending much of his time in the ancient chapel, alone in the dim shadows with the wife of his youth, and he prayed earnestly, as only strong and simple natures may, for light and for guidance and for peace of soul.

But the woman whom he meant to marry, left thus alone, would wander off across the fields and through the wood for hours together—not, as the Earl uncharitably suggested, in search for further deeds of heroism to perform, but, like Lord Stratton, for peace of soul. She made, in those days, alone with the blue sky and the clean sweet winds and the teeming earth, as brave a fight against hopeless odds as ever any one made. She was not, as she had so often despairingly cried out, a bad woman by nature or by choice, but she was stabbed and burned by a devil of jealousy against which her frail strength was altogether helpless—a devil whose unsuspected fury frightened and awed her. Under its influence every normal feeling, every generous and good impulse fell away till she was ready to use any means to gain her ends.

Young Beresford, too, seemed visibly affected by the spirit that was everywhere about Monsigny. He had spent a nearly sleepless night after his last

interview with Mrs. Marlowe on the lower terrace, and he realised, though probably not to full measure, that a woman so fiercely and unreasonably moved by jealousy might be capable of going to great extremes; so that he went about gloomily like the others, fearful of he knew not what, and avoided Isabeau as much as he could. He spent the greater part of his time with the old Earl, to that gentleman's huge delight. In the morning they conscientiously lifted the white heifer, which accepted its doubled indignities with patient resignation, and during the day they rode or tramped about the estate, superintending the necessary repairs and the gardening and forestry.

But the girl went about her usual routine very silently and making no comment, only she seemed to grow a little pale and very patently sober, and her eyes when they met Ashton Beresford's were shadowy and bewildered and full of a strange questioning pain that caught at his heart and tore it.

Once—it was toward the week's end—she met him alone in the avenue. He was on his way to the stables to join the Earl, and he could not avoid stopping to speak to her.

"You—you have not seen—the roses of late,

monsieur," she said. "You—liked them, once. You—have forgotten them, monsieur? You do not care for roses any more?" And she looked up into his face with a little sad smile.

"Oh, mademoiselle," said he, "how could they help being beautiful as ever, with the care they have? And how might a man forget them, mademoiselle?"

The girl laughed softly—eagerly. "Ah!" said she, very low, "that sounds like—like the old times, monsieur, before this—strangeness came upon us all, so lately. What is it, monsieur? What is it, this thing that hangs over Monsigny? Me, I am cold always"—she drew her shoulders together with a little shiver—"and my heart, it is heavy as stone. Father goes about so silent and gloomy, and Mrs. Marlowe, too. And you, monsieur, you are always with *grandpere*, *triste* and sober. Ah, what is it that has come to us?"

Beresford smiled down into her face, but his heart beat fiercely.

"Black butterflies, mademoiselle," said he. "Clouds in the soul; but clouds pass always, and there'll be sunshine soon again. There *shall* be!" he cried in a determined tone. "Alas, I do not know what has come upon us all. The Earl says that something is going to happen.

It may be so. But clouds pass, always, always. Oh, mademoiselle, do not look so sad! I cannot bear it. I——" He caught himself up, very quickly, for his voice was shaking, and his arms were going out toward her, beyond his control. He made as if he would pass her, going on toward the stables, but his eyes met hers, and they held him with chains. He raised his hands a little way and dropped them again beside him. It bore a certain air of surrender.

"Come and walk with me," said he. "I had meant to ride with the Earl, but—it seems so very long since I have had more than a word from you! Come and walk with me. We will go down by the fountains."

So they crossed the avenue, and descended the curving marble steps to the first terrace. And they went in beside the narrow pool to the splashing Nereid fountain, and sat down where Lord Stratton and Mrs. Marlowe had sat, a few days before.

But when they were come there, an odd constraint, a certain shyness, seemed to fall upon them both, so that for a time they avoided each other's eyes and were at a loss for words.

"Have you—lifted the calf this morning,

monsieur," ventured Isabeau at last, "you and *grandpère?*"

"We have," said young Beresford proudly. "It was much heavier than yesterday. We shall not be able to lift it much longer—a fortnight possibly." He broke off all at once and his voice altered in tone.

"Why," he said, as if to himself, "I shan't be here so long as that—I hadn't thought. Why, I'll be gone!" It was as if the idea were quite new to him, as if he had not given a thought to leaving Monsigny.

The girl made a little low exclamation under her breath, and, for a moment, her hands pressed, one upon the other, in her lap till the fingers whitened.

"Gone?" she said aloud. "Gone from—Monsigny?"

"I wasn't asked for the summer, mademoiselle," said Beresford, laughing.

"You were asked for so long as you might wish to stay," declared Isabeau de Monsigny, and she would not smile. "I had not—thought of your going so soon."

"Nor I, mademoiselle," said he gently. "But you are very rash to say that I was asked for as long as I might choose to

stay. I should grow gray here, old and gray and infirm."

"Not infirm," said she. "Never infirm, I think. You will grow old like my *grandpère*—and that is a good way. You are like him even now, save your mouth and what your mouth betokens. The very first time I saw you, down in Mentone, I thought that of you—that you were like my *grandpère*, and so, of course, like my father. It was at the Contessa d'Ariosta's ball. Do you remember? Ah, monsieur, it was ungallant of you! I saw you and watched you for an hour before you even noticed me and had yourself presented."

"Wrong, mademoiselle," said young Beresford. "Very wrong. A man may watch a woman and a woman never know. I saw you when you came into the room. I was there only because I knew you were to come. Oh, wrong, mademoiselle! Why, I'd followed you to Mentone from Nice, and to Nice from Paris. Saw me before I noticed you, indeed!"

"What do you—mean?" cried Isabeau de Monsigny, staring at him. "Followed me from Paris? What do you mean?"

"Just that," said he. "I saw you for the first time at the Opèra in Paris. I knew who you

must be, for I'd heard of you, of course. There could not be two such as you in the world. I had met your father, too, once or twice in London, but long ago. I watched you all through the opera—I remember it was 'Sanson et Dalila'—and afterward I followed you to your hotel; it was the Bristol in the Place Vendome. You walked home, it was such a little distance, and the night was fine. Then I went back to the Café de Paris and sat for two hours making up a plausible excuse for calling upon Lord Stratton the next day. Alas! the next day you went on to Nice, and I after you. I gave up a trip to India to do it."

He gave a gentle little deprecatory laugh, as if he were condoning some rather amusing bit of folly, but Isabeau de Monsigny leaned forward, staring at the moss-stained Nereids, and her hands clasped and twisted in her lap.

"Is that—true?" she asked after a moment, "quite true? It's the sort of thing men say to women to please them—the sort of thing one reads in a book. Is it really—true?"

"Very true, mademoiselle," said young Beresford. "Mad, if you like, but very true."

"Mad?" she queried as if she did not understand.

"I maintain," said Ashton Beresford, "that the tides are mad to follow the moon across the earth and back again. What good is it going to do them? They'll never reach her. They'll never do more than beat their heart out on an unsympathetic and rock-bound coast."

"Then why follow me, monsieur?" she said in a low tone. "Why didn't you go to India?"

"Alas, mademoiselle!" said he, sighing. "Why don't the tides learn common sense?"

He was laughing, half in mockery, but the girl raised her head, meeting his eyes with hers, wide and shadowy and purple. The laugh ceased as if some one had laid a hand upon his throat, and the old familiar heart-throb began in him, the quickened breath, the rising flood of love and tenderness which must, in a moment more, make itself evident. He tore his gaze away from her, and forced his thoughts in another direction, as he had so often, of late, to do, for no man who loves a woman with all his strength may look full into her eyes and remain undisturbed.

"Monsieur," said Isabeau de Monsigny timidly, and she still watched his face. "Monsieur, I wish I knew—I wish I might ask—I suppose I am too curious—like a cat—but there is something strange that I would give much to under-

stand. It is about—you, monsieur. Sometimes you are happy and—and natural, and as you used to be in Mentone. Then, all at once—it is as if you thought of something that you had, for a little, forgotten—you turn very bitter and—different. It is not just black butterflies, no. It is more serious than that. Just now, a moment ago, you—changed. Is it nothing that can be helped, monsieur? Can no one——"

She broke off suddenly, for she saw that he was not listening to her, that his eyes were fixed beyond her upon something which she could not see. He seemed to have gone a little pale, and his brows were drawn together and his lips tightened into a hard straight line.

She turned about, wondering, and followed the direction of his gaze. Some one was walking alone down on the lower esplanade beside the lagoon, some one in black with a wide hat—Mrs. Marlowe. The girl looked swiftly from Beresford's face to the distant figure, and back again.

"Monsieur!" she cried in a sharp tone. "Monsieur! Is that—it?" she said presently, half whispering. "Is it—*she?* I thought the first evening, when you met her——" Then she stopped again, abruptly, as if she realised that

she had no right to say such things. But she stared a long time at Ashton Beresford's frowning heedless face.

"I think," she said after a time, "that we would best go back up to the house. Yes? *Grandpère* will be waiting to ride with you. And me, I have many things to do this morning. Shall we go, monsieur?"

"Eh, what?" said young Beresford. "Oh, yes, yes! Just as you like." He rose with a sigh, and they mounted the steps to the upper terrace in silence. Beresford was too preoccupied to notice that the girl had, all at once, acquired a certain new air of reserve, almost of *hauteur*. The sight of Mrs. Marlowe had—as upon another occasion, in the rose gardens—broken roughly and unpleasantly in upon his mood, filmed the yellow glow of the sunlight, put him out of temper with the world.

But at the head of the marble steps he pulled himself together for an instant.

"It is nothing, mademoiselle," said he with a wry smile that could not seem genuine. It is nothing but the cloud that is over us all here. I do not know what it is. Clouds pass."

The droop of the girl's averted head waked

in him again a sudden little gust of love and tenderness.

"Ah, there'll be sunshine again!" he cried half fiercely. "There *shall* be!"

One of her hands—long and white, blue-veined, pink-tipped, rested upon the corner of the balustrade beside him.

"There *shall* be, mademoiselle!" he cried once more, and he took the hand to his flushed face and held it there against his lips.

But when he had gone away toward the stables, Isabeau de Monsigny stood a long time beside the stair balustrade among the shrubbery, with her face hidden upon her arms—white and shaking.

CHAPTER X

CHAPTER X

THE next morning he met Isabeau again, by chance, very early. He had just finished his breakfast and come out upon the south terrace when he saw her leaving the château. She wore the big white hat which had shaded her that other morning in the rose garden, and she carried a small basket on one arm. A great wolfhound, ragged and dangerous-looking, a sullen beast, marched beside her.

"*Bon jour*, monsieur!" she said cheerfully, when she saw him. "You are up early, but so *very* early! Me, I am going upon an errand of mercy. Figure to yourself! An old *nounou* of mine, who lives toward St. Cyr, is ill, and I am carrying her certain things here in the basket. Do you not wish you were a *nounou*, monsieur, and very old and ill, and that you lived toward St. Cyr?"

"I do," said Beresford fervently. "I wish I were anything you like, if only you would carry me things in a basket and come to see me."

"Who knows?" said she, "when you are old

—perhaps," and she nodded her beautiful head very encouragingly.

"But is it safe," he demanded, "all alone, so, on the public roads?"

"Oh, as for that," said she, "it is but a little way, hardly a mile, when one is outside the gate. I go by the little gate to the north, beyond the gardens, because it is so near. Moreover, the road is not like ordinary roads—it is not a high-road. There is seldom any one on it, because the highroad is so much shorter between the two villages. My road is little more than a *sentier*. Also, for protection, I have Voyou here." She patted the great hound on the head, and he gave a sullen growl, moving impatiently away.

"*Comment, comment, toi!*" she cried in surprise. "This Voyou, he is not in good spirits, *ce matin*. *Hèlas!* monsieur, he has the *tristesse* of all of us here at Monsigny. It is contagious. No?" She nodded her head to him, laughing over her shoulder, and moved toward the gardens around the west wing of the château. The hound followed at her heels.

Beresford strolled on to the stables and found the Earl there, arguing with a certain green hunter which he meant himself to school, and

which he was attempting to put over a low bar at a leading-rein.

The two amused themselves with the horse for a time, and when they tired of that repaired to the dairy and lifted the long-suffering heifer. After about an hour they turned back toward the château.

"Where is Isabeau this morning?" inquired the Earl.

"She has gone on a visit to an old nurse, toward St. Cyr," said Beresford. "She is taking her a small basket of things, I believe. She had a precious ugly looking dog with her, for company."

"Dog?" demanded the old gentleman. "Dog? What dog?"

"Hound called Voyou," said the other. "Sulky beast! Snarled when she patted him."

The Earl swore.

"I told that kennel fool not to let Voyou out, nor to let any one near him!" said he. "The dog has been acting very odd for some days. I don't think it can be the weather, for the weather has not been particularly warm. I suppose it is all right," he went on, frowning rather anxiously. "The hound has known Isabeau since he was a puppy, and she has perfect control of him. Still, I don't like it. I wish she had not taken him."

Beresford glanced sharply at the old man's troubled face.

"I think," said he, "that if you will direct me, I will just go and meet mademoiselle. It may be all right, but—I'd rather be sure."

"Ah, now, that would be a very good thing!" said the Earl. "Here, take this dog-whip. I expect the brute will be quiet, all right, but it's best to be on the safe side. You know the little gate, I believe. Just turn to the right as you go out. The house is about a mile away, straight down the road, past a little round point."

Beresford went quickly across the gardens and out through the little gate in the high wall.

The road outside was, as Isabeau had said, scarcely more than a *sentier*. It was narrow and overgrown with grass—a mere country lane. He walked along it for half a mile, under the shade of the overhanging trees, and through lengths of open where the dust lay white like flour. The great walls of the Monsigny estate ran beside him for a space, but presently turned off at a sharp angle, and there was open rolling country on either side, dotted with trees and with little white plastered red-roofed cottages. Far off to his left were huddled roofs and steeples, flanked by a great wood, and this he thought

must be Versailles, though he could not see the palace.

Then at last, when he was beginning to think that the round point of which the old Earl had spoken could not be far ahead, he heard the barking and yelping of a dog. The road curved before him and trees stood close beside it, so that he could see only a little way, but he quickened his pace, knowing that Isabeau must be just around the bend.

"The hound is coursing a rabbit or something of the sort," he said to himself. But, as he rounded the curve, he saw that the great dog was not coursing, but had treed something, and was giving tongue at the foot of the tree, leaping up into the air and snapping in a very strange fashion. Sometimes, it took a little run away from the tree and back again, or round in a great circle, head upward and barking furiously.

Beresford halted for an instant, to watch the hound's strange actions. He had never seen a dog behave so over treed game. Then, all at once, he dashed forward with a sudden cry of amazement and horror, for he had looked up into the low branches of the tree and had seen that Isabeau de Monsigny clung there but a little distance from the ground, and, furthermore, that the

branch upon which she stood swayed and drooped with her weight.

As he ran he threw from him the dog-whip, with its leash, for he knew that it was useless, and he caught up from the roadside a great stone of five or six pounds' weight. He had looked about swiftly for a stick, or for anything with which to strike a heavy blow, but the smooth white road lay bare and empty, and the turf at its flanks empty as well.

"Mademoiselle, mademoiselle!" he called as he ran. "Courage, mademoiselle! Hold on a little longer, just a moment longer!" and her voice came back to him promptly, faint and strained, but very brave.

"Quick, monsieur! Quick as you may! I cannot hold long. Quick, monsieur!"

The dog had halted suddenly at Beresford's call, and stood beside the tree, head down and foam trickling from the corners of its mouth. The ragged hair about its neck and shoulders bristled. Then, with a little eager whine, it made straight at him, and Beresford hurled the stone with both hands.

It did not strike the animal upon the head or full in the breast, as he had meant, but struck a glancing blow on one shoulder, and the hound's

impetus carried him by, thrown out of course, but not badly injured. There was no time to look for another stone, for the animal turned sharply with a snarl of rage, and came back.

By chance, young Beresford was wearing a pair of unusually thick-soled and heavy boots, for, if the morning were cool, he had meant to take a long tramp over the estate, and it was this chance which probably saved both his own life and that of Isabeau de Monsigny, for, as the maddened animal sprang for him, he kicked with all his great strength and struck full under its jaw, so that it turned quite over and fell, snarling and twitching, upon its back in the dusty road.

The beast's jaw was undoubtedly broken, for no bone could withstand such a terrific blow, but the vitality of any animal when maddened is something amazing, and in an instant the hound was on its feet and again springing for Beresford's throat. This time his kick was not swift enough and, missing the head, struck under the lean body.

The girl, watching from the tree above, screamed once, but, even as she screamed, she saw young Beresford's great arms go out forward, and his hands settle about the animal's throat, forcing

it backward so that once more it fell to the ground, this time with the man close above. And there, writhing and struggling in the white dust, she saw an almost unbelievable feat of strength performed, for the man, with his hands set in a vice-like grip about the hairy throat below him, slowly choked the great mad hound to death, and when he rose at last to his feet there was only a quivering carcass stretched across the road.

Of what happened immediately afterward she knew nothing till she found herself lying upon the turf by the roadside, and young Beresford on his knees beside her. She had fainted quite away once the danger was over, and Beresford had turned just in time to catch her in his arms as she slipped from the low branches.

She lay for a long time silent, looking up from shadowy half-closed eyes into the man's face, and his face was very white and still, and the brows were drawn a bit together, and his breathing came fast and stormily.

"Oh, monsieur!" she said at last in a little low murmur. "Monsieur, you were just in time. I could have clung to the tree no longer. You saved my life, monsieur."

"If I had not been in time!" he whispered with strange little breaks between the words.

"She found herself lying upon the turf by the roadside, and young Beresford on his knees beside her"

"Oh, heart of my soul, if I had not been in time!" But the girl raised one slim hand and laid it upon his cheek. Under it the cheek flamed suddenly crimson and paled again, and he caught the hand in both his own and held it to his lips, kissing it as if he would never leave off. The girl's eyelids fluttered and closed. The great white hat had fallen backward as Beresford had laid her upon the turf, so that it made a sort of pillow for her head, and the wonderful pale hair—the soul of gold—had slipped a little from its bonds and lay in soft, loosened coils about her flushed face.

"Oh!" cried the man, "I love you so that I cannot think nor speak—so that my heart shakes me from head to foot! I love you more than any one in all the world ever loved anything! If only I could tell you how I love you! You are the most beautiful thing that a man could dream! Ah, my heart, if you had been—if I had come too late I should not have lived, for I cannot live without you."

He bent over her, kneeling, and held her head between his two hands, as it lay on the soft turf. Coils and strands of the soul of gold burned against his fingers. And the girl put up her other hand and, with the two, drew down his head, looking

very steadily and gravely into his eyes, till his face was against her own, and he kissed her mouth with a quick catching breath.

"Oh, Lord of my heart," said she, against his lips, "there is no one in all my world but you! Didn't you know? Ah, didn't you know?" Then after a long time, "Dearest," she said, "was there a reason why you—why you avoided me for so long—why you would never be alone with me, but went about so soberly and *triste?* For I knew long ago that you—cared just a—a little, *peut être*. That first evening by the lagoon, I knew, and the morning in the rose garden I knew. I think I knew even last winter in Mentone. Was there a reason, *mon cœur?*"

Beresford took her two hands, so slender and white and pink-tipped, into his, and held them against his cheek, and he smiled down upon her with a certain resolute tightening of the lips, a certain squaring of the strong jaw.

"Yes," said he, "there was a reason. I thought there was a reason. Do not ask me it. But I see now that there could be no reason strong enough to hold us apart. I see now that I was foolish, frightened by a phantom. There can be nothing cruel enough to part us. Loveliest, we can defy the world now!"

He lifted her to her feet and, without looking backward at the thing which lay stretched across the dusty road, they turned their faces toward Château Monsigny.

"Lord of my heart, we can defy the world now," said she.

CHAPTER XI

CHAPTER XI

Lord Stratton—they found him alone on the south terrace with a book—turned very pale when he was told of what had occurred, and caught his daughter to him, suddenly, with one arm, looking into her face as if, all at once, he realised how dear to him she was.

"Isabeau owes her life to you," he said unsteadily to young Beresford, "and I owe you more than I owe to any one else in the world. There is nothing I can say to thank you, and nothing I can do to even the obligation."

Beresford looked at Isabeau de Monsigny, and Isabeau, turning suddenly crimson, looked away.

"Why—why, as for that, sir," he said, "yes, you can. You can—give her to me, sir. She —says she is willing to come, and—well, I love her very dearly and—all that, you know. Of course, it is a great deal to ask, isn't it?"

Lord Stratton looked into his daughter's face, laughing gently.

"He is better at saving lives than at making speeches, this young man," said he. "But that

is quite as well. I have been hoping, for some time, that you two would decide you wished to marry."

He looked over his daughter's head, still holding her with one arm, at the sound of a step on the flagstoned terrace. Mrs. Marlowe was coming up from the avenue. He called to her, and she moved a little way toward them.

"I want you to be the first to hear some very good news," said he. "My daughter Isabeau is to marry the Honourable Ashton Beresford. He saved her, this morning, from a very horrible death, and he demands herself as a reward. Won't you offer them your congratulations, and me as well? I think I am as pleased about it as they are."

But Mrs. Marlowe stood silent, looking from one to the other of the little group, wide-eyed and pale. And her fingers twisted and shook at her breast. Then, all at once, she turned, with a low cry, and ran into the open door of the château.

Beresford looked after her, frowning and tight lipped, but Isabeau and Lord Stratton gave voice to their amazement.

"What—what in the world is the matter?" cried the girl. "Why should she act so? Father, what is the matter with her?"

"God knows!" said the Viscount in a wondering, shocked tone. "God knows! She has acted very strangely of late, several times. What can she—— Oh, she is very nervous, and not at all well, and she has had an unhappy life. I suppose the sight of other people's happiness is too much for her. We must make allowances. She will feel differently after a little. That was most curious. I do not understand."

Mrs. Marlowe did not appear at luncheon, much to the relief of the others—save, perhaps, Lord Stratton, who was anxious about her; but they told the Earl what had happened on the road to St. Cyr, and that Isabeau was to be married to Ashton Beresford. The old gentleman was so delighted he could hardly contain himself, and became quite humorous in his elephantine fashion. He brought a hectic flush to the unaccustomed cheek of Mme. de Brissal by insisting upon kissing her in honour of the occasion, after having nearly annihilated Isabeau in his bear's embrace. And he drank to the health and happiness of the two young people till any other man but this iron veteran would have been under the table.

After luncheon Beresford went up to his rooms in search of a mislaid pipe. He came upon Mrs.

Marlowe in the upper corridor, and would have turned into his room with only a nod, but she followed him, and closed the door behind her.

"Is that true?" she demanded quickly, with her back against the door. Her face was very white, and her eyes burned. They seemed much larger than common.

"That I am to marry Is—Mademoiselle de Monsigny?" he asked. "Oh, yes, that is true."

"After what I said to you last evening?" she persisted. "After my refusing to release you?"

Beresford turned upon her impatiently.

"I deny your right to hold me to anything," said he. "Must we go over all the argument again? I begin to tire of it. You are to marry another man. That fact, in itself, releases me." He felt a curious sense of impotence in speaking to her. It was as if he shouted to a deaf woman or argued with some one who did not understand his language. Men must arrive at conclusions, or determine a course of conduct, by reason; and, being a man, he felt strangely helpless before this woman to whom, in her overwrought state, reason made no appeal whatever. He realised, as he had not realised before, her oddly dual nature, with its wholesome, sweet, womanly side, normal and tender if weak, which could be so

altered under the obsession of jealousy that she was left a demon, unreasoning and reckless.

His utter helplessness angered him.

"Oh, this is perfect nonsense!" he cried sharply. "You are trying to make us both play an absurd melodrama. I, for one, refuse to play. I have as good a right to marry as have you—or any one else."

But the woman came up closer to him, looking into his face with those great burning unnatural eyes.

"Oh, be careful, Tony!" she said, very low. "For Heaven's sake, be careful! I—I warned you, last night, that I was not responsible for myself when that—thing was stabbing me through. I warned you not to try me too far, but you've done it. You've done it as quickly as ever you could. Now, have a care! I love you! Good God, how I love you, sometimes! And no other woman shall have you. If I didn't know that you would drive me mad in a week with your coldness, if I thought there was any least spark of love for me left in you, I should throw over Lord Stratton and make you marry me. I shall never have you for my own, Tony, but neither shall that girl, for I'm going to stop it, here and

now. I'm going to tell them about you and—and Mrs.—Travers."

Beresford gave a short laugh of utter amazement.

"You are going to give yourself away?" he demanded, still laughing. "Nonsense! Do you suppose for an instant that Lord Stratton would marry you if he knew you were Mrs. Travers? Besides, you would not hurt me at all. They know that I figured in that affair—both Lord Stratton and the Earl know it. You're mad, Margaret!"

"I am not Mrs. Travers," she cried, in a fierce, low tone. "I am Mrs. Marlowe, and they shall never know that I was divorced, for you have promised that you would not tell. You'll not break your promise, Tony. You'll not betray me, whatever I may say. You never broke a promise in your life, and you'd no more think of betraying a woman than you would think of murdering her. Oh, I have you, Tony! I have you, fast and strong! I shall tell them that you're not a fit man to marry Isabeau de Monsigny. I shall tell them that you are bound to a divorced woman and not free to marry, and you dare not deny it, for you can't betray me. Oh, I have you, my friend! I can never marry you, but I

can wreck you! Tony! Tony! Tony! Could you not love me a little—just the least in the world? Have you no little bit of tenderness left for me? See! I'll throw over this match with Lord Stratton. We can go away together and be married. Tony, couldn't you learn to love me again—just a little, just a little, boy?"

She had fallen over forward against him, catching him with her hands upon his shoulders, and her face was hidden upon his breast. Her voice broke into great racking, painful sobs, and he felt all her frail body shake with them.

He put her from him almost roughly, staring into her eyes, and his own were wide with amazement and horror and unbelief.

"You'll not do such a thing, Margaret?" he cried in a whisper. "You'll not dare do such a thing! Great God, it's unbelievable; it's monstrous! No, no! No sane woman could grovel so low. I won't believe it."

"I am not sane, Tony," she said, dully, and her eyes fronted him unafraid. "I am quite mad sometimes, when—when I think of certain things. Yes, I shall do it, and I am going to do it now. I am quite desperate. Nothing you can say will stop me. I know just how shameful and low and contemptible I am, but I could no more stop than

any poor cornered animal could lie still, to be done to death without fighting."

Beresford sprang forward, catching her by the arm. "Stop!" he cried hoarsely. "Stop! You must not go. You must not be so mad. I tell you, you would die of the shame of it, afterward. You must not do it. By Heaven, if you do——"

"What, Tony?" she asked, facing him again.

"I shall tell them, on my part," said he slowly, "just who and what you are, and why you are masquerading here under a stolen name. Two can play at your game, my lady. If you've a mind to crawl so low, I shall do a bit of crawling, too. Tell a word of what you have been threatening, and I shall expose you."

"No, you won't!" she cried swiftly, and she came up to him once more till her face was close to his and her eyes burned into his eyes.

"No, you won't, Tony!" said she. "Ruin a woman? No, not you. Some men might, but you won't. Try it, my friend. Try to say the words and your tongue won't move. Ah, I know you, Tony, better than you know yourself. You'd let fifty women wreck your life, vilify you, lie about you, ruin you, but you'd never turn on one of them! Try it, Tony, try it."

Then in a moment, and before he could stop her, she had slipped out of the room, closing the door after her. Beresford dropped into a chair, covering his face with shaking hands.

CHAPTER XII

CHAPTER XII

How long he sat there he did not know; it was probably not more than a few minutes, that might have been hours, but he was roused by a knocking at the door. A lackey entered, at his word, saying that Lord Stratton wished to see him on the south terrace.

"She'll not do it!" cried Beresford. "She'll not dare. It was a wretched trick to get a promise out of me. Nonsense! Of course, she won't do it."

He ran down the stairs, laughing at himself for having given the thing a moment's credence, but his heart beat fast for all that.

On the south terrace he found Mrs. Marlowe and Isabeau de Monsigny and Lord Stratton. The Viscount was walking nervously back and forth, smiting his hands together. He frowned a bit, and his eyes were anxious and a little appealing as he turned to meet young Beresford.

"Ashton," said he, "I sent for you because Mrs. Marlowe has—has said that she knows something very—serious about you, something which

must prevent your marriage with Isabeau." He paused a moment, looking toward the woman, and his eyes seemed to grow more anxious, more pained and appealing. "I wanted you to be present when she tells this because I am certain that you can explain. I want to say that I have perfect confidence in you—perfect. It may be—it may be that Mrs. Marlowe has been misinformed. I am certain that you can explain."

Beresford looked once at Margaret Marlowe, and from her to Isabeau. The girl's face was very pale, but she smiled a little, scornfully, and her purple eyes were tender and full of trust. There was no doubt or fear in them. Then he drew a quick sigh.

"I am ready to hear what Mrs.—Mrs. Marlowe has to tell," said he.

The woman turned toward Lord Stratton and began speaking at once. Beresford noted that her face was cold and still—she was holding herself well in hand—but that the hands hanging at her sides shook violently, and that her chin trembled sometimes so that she had to pause, between words, to steady it.

"I think you know, Lord Stratton," she said in a low voice, "that no one could regret more than I regret being forced to—to make a scene at

your house, to denounce one of your guests, but I have no choice. It is precisely because I am one of your guests, because I owe you a debt of hospitality, that I must not stand idly by while a great wrong is being done you. If—if I should see a burglar attempting to steal the Monsigny plate it would be my duty immediately to tell you. It is still more my duty to tell you when I see any one attempting to steal what is far more dear to you. This—this man is here on false pretenses. He has no right to marry your daughter or any other woman—save one. He is not free——" Lord Stratton would have interrupted her, but she raised her hand to him, and went on, speaking rapidly, and her eyes were wide and dark and defiant, fixed upon young Beresford's face.

"He is bound to another woman," said she, "a woman who was divorced by her husband on this man's account. Yes, you know of the affair; you spoke of it, once. The woman is a Mrs.—Mrs. Travers. You thought, and other people thought, that this man was innocent, that he was wrongfully dragged into the case, but that is not so. He was not innocent. When the thing was over, he promised to marry the woman, Mrs.—Travers. He told her that the

rest of his life was hers, that he would never marry any one else. Then he went away. That is the sort of man you were giving your daughter to, Lord Stratton. That is the sort of man you were welcoming in your house, a man who compromised another's wife, and then, when the woman was cast adrift, ran away lest he should have to marry her!"

"How do you know all this?" demanded a gruff, harsh voice behind her. "How do you happen to have such a quantity of special knowledge about the Travers divorce affair?"

The woman swung about, white and gasping, and it was the Earl of Strope who spoke. His bushy white eyebrows were drawn down and together, and the keen old eyes flashed at her. For a moment she was off her guard, shaking in a panic, for she feared the old Earl more than any man living; but she was herself again, directly.

"I know poor Mrs. Travers, since you ask, sir," she said with a certain cold dignity. "She has a little villa, near Tours, where she has hidden a broken heart and a broken life from the world. I visit her there sometimes, for we were friends many years ago—dear friends. She has been a sinful woman, if you like, but she has been well punished for it, and I, for one, will not turn

against her." She looked again toward young Beresford, and her voice mounted a bit. It was wonderful acting.

"But," she cried, "if that poor woman was sinful, what of this man—betrayer and coward! Oh, it is quite time that some one showed him for what he is." She turned to Lord Stratton, lowering her voice. "When I came here," she said, "I did not know that this person was to be your guest. You told me of it soon after my arrival, and, if you chance to remember, I had some difficulty in hiding my feelings. I made an excuse for losing my countenance. Afterward, I did not wish to make a scene—I thought it better not to do so, for it would be very unpleasant for all of you. I did not know his object in coming here. To-day, when you told me that he was to marry Isabeau, I could remain silent no longer. I owed it to you to tell what I knew. That is all, I think, Lord Stratton. This man is not fit or free to marry your daughter."

Lord Stratton drew his hand across his brow, and his usually strong and iron face was a mask of amazed incredulous horror.

"Ashton! Ashton!" he said appealingly, and his voice shook. "This cannot be true. It can-

not. I will not believe it. She—she must be wrong. Tell us that it is not true. Explain it, Ashton! Tell us it is not true!" His hand upon young Beresford's arm shook like the voice.

"I tell you," cried Beresford fiercely, "it is all —all——" His eyes met the woman's eyes, and she moved closer to him, white-faced and somber.

"Can you deny it, Mr. Beresford?" she said, very low. "Can you deny it? Think a moment! Either it is true or I am the most contemptible thing in all the world. Either I have been speaking the truth or I am what you would call, if I were a man, a blackguard, and worse. Are you not bound to that woman? Did you not promise to marry her? And has she not refused to release you from your promise? Are you free, Mr. Beresford?"

A great wave of crimson spread up over Beresford's face and ebbed again, leaving him very pale. His mind moved with a certain unnatural swiftness, and he saw clearly what was facing him —the utter and lasting ruin of all that made his life dear. Everything in him ached and struggled to burst out in denunciation of the monstrous charges this woman made, but he was curiously helpless. His tongue stammered and would not form the words. He remembered dully what the

woman had said to him up in his room. "Try it, my friend! Try to say the words and your tongue won't move. Ah, I know you, Tony, better than you know yourself. You'd let fifty women wreck your life, vilify you, lie about you, ruin you, but you'd never turn on one of them! Try it, Tony, try it!"

Yes, she had known him better than he knew himself. He could not turn on her. He was, in some strange way, physically incapable of it.

"Can you deny it, Mr. Beresford?" she asked again, close to his face.

Beresford dropped his head and made a queer little helpless gesture with his two hands.

"I cannot deny it," said he.

But Isabeau de Monsigny ran forward, brushing past the other woman, and caught him by the shoulders, looking into his eyes.

"It is not true!" she cried fiercely. "It is a frightful, horrible lie! I won't believe it. No one can make me believe it. Oh, say it is a lie! Tell them it isn't true. Why do you stand there, silent? Do you want to break my heart? Tell them it isn't true!"

"I cannot deny it," said Beresford again, and his voice sounded very tired. There was no life in it. He turned about to Lord Stratton,

and the Viscount raised a haggard, sad face to him.

"You cannot deny this?" he asked, wistfully.

"No," said Beresford. "No, I cannot deny it."

"Then," said Lord Stratton, "then——"

"I know what you would say," broke in the younger man, "I—shall be leaving within the hour, for Paris." He took the girl's hands from his shoulders, not looking at her, and put her very gently away from him. Then he bowed, and went quickly indoors.

He packed the two large Gladstone bags that he had brought with him to Monsigny and rang for a servant to take them down. And he asked the servant to have a trap of some sort sent around from the stables to drive him to Versailles. Then he sat down in a chair by an open window, with his head in his hands, silent and motionless, for a very long time.

The rolling of wheels on the gravel drive beneath his window roused him at last. He looked out and saw that it was the trap come to take him to the station, and he gathered up his hat and gloves and went down.

At the head of the stairs he had to step aside to allow some one to come up the last of the winding turns. In an instant he saw that it was

Mrs. Marlowe, and he drew farther back into the shadows, hoping that she would not see him. She was sobbing as she came, with her head bent low, and this, with a very violent trembling which shook her from head to foot—the reaction from the long nervous strain in which she had held herself so calmly, made her approach slow and difficult, so that she held to the wall with one hand, and paused a little after each uncertain step.

Nevertheless, she saw him waiting there in the shadows, and halted at the top of the stairs, leaning against the wall.

"Oh, Tony, Tony!" she moaned, stretching out an arm to him as she clung to the wall. "Oh, Tony, I have ruined the one thing in all the world that I loved. God help me! I wonder if you will ever understand, Tony! I wonder if you will understand!" But Beresford passed her quickly and went on down the stairs, not looking into her face again, and as he rounded the next turn he heard her sobbing break out afresh.

Down by the steps of the terrace where the trap was waiting he found the Earl and Isabeau. Lord Stratton had disappeared. The old gentleman seized the hand which he would have withheld and pumped at it vigorously.

"I want you to understand," he growled, "that

I don't believe a word of all that damned nonsense —not a word. I don't understand what is going on, and, maybe, I never shall, though it won't be for want of trying; but I know that woman is playing you a nasty trick, somehow, and you're such a cursedly Quixotic beggar that you won't give her away. Just you mind my words! We'll have this thing cleared up or break our necks trying. I know she's playing some sort of game."

Beresford shook his head, and tried to smile.

"I'm afraid it can't be cleared up," said he, "though, God knows, I'm grateful to you for feeling like this about it. No, it won't be cleared up. I'm—I'm done for, sir."

But Isabeau came close to him, looking into his face, and her eyes were very troubled and shadowy and full of distress, and her lips quivered till Beresford set his teeth and clenched his fists, at his side, to hold himself in hand.

"Oh, dearest!" said she, "for the last time, will you not answer me? You have not said that those things the—the woman told were true. Were they true, my heart? Were they true?"

"I cannot deny them," he said again, very low.

"They were not true!" she cried. "Don't you suppose I would know if they were true? Don't you suppose I could tell? Ah, if you would

only speak!" Her voice broke a little, and the beautiful head drooped, but she reared it again proudly.

"You are shielding somebody," she said, in a tone of certainty. "I know that you are shielding somebody and taking upon yourself blame that you do not deserve. If only we could clear this dreadful thing up! If only we could clear it up! But, dearest of everything, though you are going away, and though I may not see you for a long time, never forget, oh, never forget, that I believe in you, trust you always, and—and love you, *mon cœur*, love you! I think we shall know the truth sometime, I feel it, but if not, why, if not, still, I shall trust you. Good-by, my king, good by! Ah, no; *au revoir*, that is better. Listen! If these clouds do not go, if you cannot come back to Monsigny, if we cannot find out the truth and lay it before my father, send for me, and I will come to you. I will not lose you so easily! I will come to you anywhere. *Au revoir, mon cœur!*"

She put out her two hands to him, but young Beresford drew back, holding himself tight in check.

"No," said he, "I will not touch you, now, not while I am under this—this shadow. If ever

it is cleared away, I shall come back. Oh, God keep you, my queen!" He climbed into the trap beside the groom who was to drive him, and they rolled swiftly away down the avenue.

But up at a window of the château, behind filmy white curtains that hid her from sight, a woman lay prone, watching for the last glimpse of him before the trap was hidden among the gloomy firs. And, when he was quite gone, she dropped her face upon her arms, sobbing still from sheer exhaustion, but dry-eyed, for she was past tears.

"If I could unsay it, Tony!" she cried voicelessly. "If only I could unsay it! Oh, how can a woman so hurt the man she loves?" Then, after a time, she raised her head again, looking idly out of the window, and, as she did so, she gave a sudden violent shiver, for her eyes had fallen upon the old Earl of Strope, who stood just below, at the edge of the terrace, with his granddaughter. His grim, lean old face and his leonine strength had never seemed to her so terrible, so sinister. She was beginning to have an almost superstitious fear of the man.

The Earl, meanwhile, was gazing after the vanished trap and bending his white brows in puzzled thought.

"If only one knew where to begin in unraveling the thing!" he growled. "If one had something upon which to start! Beresford won't say a word, that is certain, and, as for the woman, I suppose nothing could be frightened out of her. Ah! the other woman! the Mrs. Travers! If one could find her, now!" But the girl looked up suddenly, with so strange a change in her expression, so swift a movement, that he broke off in the middle of a word.

"I don't believe there is any other woman!" said the girl in a quick, trembling voice. "I believe she is Mrs. Travers, herself. No other woman would have told her such things. She is Mrs. Travers, I tell you! Who knows anything about her past life? Where does she come from? Who was her husband? No one can tell you. Oh, I'm sure she is Mrs. Travers, *grandpère!*

"By Heaven!" cried the Earl, and his own voice shook a little with the excitement. "By Heaven, I believe you're right! Why did none of us think of it before? I have a notion that I was near the idea myself when I asked her how she knew all this stuff, but her confoundedly glib answer about Mrs. Travers and her villa near Tours quite upset my mind. By Jove, if you should be right!" He paced up and down the

terrace, jerking his white head, and working his bushy eyebrows excitedly.

"But how to find out?" he said. "How to prove that it is so? The divorce was granted five years ago. Wait, wait!" He stopped dead in his walk and held up one hand.

"Those London weeklies!" he cried, "the file of them in the library! They run back more than ten years! The affair was much talked of, at the time, I remember. Travers was well known. They'll have it, the papers! Oh, why did I not think of it before? I must be growing old."

He was making hurriedly for the door, when he almost ran into Lord Stratton, who was coming out.

"Ah!" said the old gentleman, "I was wishing to see you. Do you remember the month in which that Travers divorce affair took place? I have a reason for asking. Also, do you remember anything peculiar about the case? In particular, was any other man concerned beside Ashton Beresford?"

"I am not certain," said the Viscount, "but I believe the thing occurred during the early winter —December or January, I should say, possibly November. I have no especial reason for remem-

bering, save that I knew Colonel Travers. You did, also, I think. I do not recollect that any other man was concerned in the thing, except that painter chap—what is his name? Dimmesdale, who was, and I believe is, a great friend of Beresford's, was to have given certain evidence to clear or partially clear Beresford, but didn't turn up—was ill somewhere here on the Continent. He has a studio in Paris now, I believe. I have meant, once or twice, to ask him out here. That is all I remember of the case. As I said before, it made no particularly strong impression upon me."

He turned half way, and stared gloomily out over the tree tops.

"I am not given to emotion," said he, "as you very well know, but this thing has cut me up badly. I would have sworn by young Beresford before almost any other man. Indeed, I can't yet believe that he is all we have—heard. I can't help feeling that there is a mistake somewhere. If only the lad would deny it! If only he'd deny it!"

The old Earl passed on into the château, nodding his white head.

"There is a bigger mistake somewhere than you're reckoning for," said he grimly.

Half an hour later he came hurriedly out of the

house, and found his granddaughter sitting forlornly alone in a corner of the terrace. There were certain evidences that she had been indulging in tears. The old gentleman's hands shook with excitement as he held out to her a long narrow strip cut from an illustrated paper. The strip was a single column of print with two portraits at the head—reproductions from photographs. One of the portraits was that of a man in uniform, the other of a woman.

The girl gave a smothered cry.

"It's she! Oh, it's she! It's Mrs. Marlowe!"

"It is," said the Earl; "it is Mrs. Marlowe, if we are to be civil and call her by her present *nom de guerre*. Read the notice there! It is not exactly *jeune fille* literature, but the case is rather pressing. Read particularly the last paragraph, about the other man. That is the interesting part, the other man. His name is Dimmesdale, and he is a very well-known painter. I am going in to Paris this evening to make a call upon Mr. Dimmesdale."

CHAPTER XIII

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YOUNG Beresford, when he reached Paris, put his luggage into a *fiacre* and drove at once from the Gare St. Lazare to his chambers in the rue du Faubourg St. Honorè. Then, since it was nearly seven o'clock, he proceeded slowly to dress for dinner. He had steadfastly refused, since leaving Château Monsigny, to allow his mind to dwell upon what had happened. He had driven his thoughts, by sheer force of will, into trivial channels, into making plans for amusing himself during the next few days, even to contemplating a fortnight's trip to Switzerland, and some climbing in the Oberland. Of course he knew that this was no more than a postponement of something which must be gone through; that there was a very black time ahead for him somewhere, which no temporary distraction could hope to lighten; but he shrank from the realisation of what had come upon him as a man shrinks from the operating table and the surgeon's knife.

He had no intention whatever of submitting weakly to the absolute defeat of his hopes, to the

absolute ruin of his character with the people for whose good-will he most cared, for he was a strong man and determined, and he loved Isabeau de Monsigny more than most men ever love anything in all their lives. But the woman had been very clever in dealing her blow. She had known him so well that she had felt perfectly secure in trusting to an almost Quixotic and extraordinarily rare sense of chivalry which existed in him, and which, five years before, had led him to take a stand and to make promises as few other men would have done. She had so phrased her denunciation of him that to deny it, to clear himself, meant that he must expose her; and this, she knew, he was entirely incapable of doing. Her only mistake was in failing to realise that danger might develop from other quarters.

He had no intention, it has been said, of submitting to his present condition, and he fully purposed somehow to clear himself of the stigma which had been put upon him, but he wished time to consider, and for the immediate present he wished not to consider at all. The blow had been a very heavy one. It would have been interesting to trace, if subsequent events had not, as they did, hurried the affair to a conclusion without his interference, just to what extremes a man of his

temperament, strong and passionate and determined, but handicapped always by a sense of honour almost fantastic, would have gone to clear his name and to gain the woman he loved, for he would surely have gained her at the last by any cost.

He stood a moment when he had dressed looking down into the busy rue du Faubourg St. Honorè, where cabs passed in an endless double chain and the pavement was crowded by homeward-bound shoppers and working people.

"I think I will look up Dimmesdale," he said at last. "He probably will not yet have left the studio, and I mustn't be alone for the evening. Good God, not that!"

He took a *fiacre* and drove across the river along the broad Boulevard St. Germain and up the rue de Rennes, and turned into the quiet little rue Notre Dame des Champs, where Dimmesdale's studio sat in the midst of a garden behind a great wall with "*Defense d' Afficher*" printed large across the stucco. Dimmesdale himself came to the door in answer to his ring, and greeted him with the quiet heartiness of long friendship.

Dimmesdale was a rather tall man, very slightly made, and he had the pallour of one little given to

sports or an out-of-door life. His lack of muscular development showed at the neck and in the wrists, and in the legs when the cloth of his trousers was drawn tight over them. He had a handsome face, but it was heavily lined and drawn and a bit haggard. He could not have been over forty or thereabouts, but he had the look of a man ten years older, and his eyes were very weary.

"I am glad you chanced to turn up," said he, "for I have been feeling just a bit seedy and at odds with the world all day long. I was debating a few minutes ago as to whether I wished to dress and go out somewhere for dinner, or dine comfortably here—in the garden, perhaps. I sometimes have Jean bring me in a sort of dinner from one of the restaurants near. What have you been doing of late? Where are you from?"

"I have been stopping out in the country for a few days," said Beresford, "at Château Monsigny, near Versailles. Lord Stratton, the son of the old Earl of Strope, married the daughter and heiress of the last Marquis a long time ago, you know. He lives there now with his daughter, who is the present heiress, and with the old Earl. It is a beautiful place."

"Ah, yes!" said Dimmesdale, "I have met the Earl. Heavens, what a splendid old type! And

I think I have met Lord Stratton. I saw the girl once, here at the Opèra. I rather think she is the most beautiful woman I have ever seen. I should like to paint her. Was there a party?"

"No," said young Beresford, "only one other guest. I—I think I shall be wanting to tell you something, a bit later, something very important, an important difficulty. I could tell no one else but you, for you already know many of the circumstances connected with the thing. You know—or knew—this other guest at Monsigny. However, that will wait till after dinner. By all means let us have dinner here, in the garden. Afterward I think—I am not sure, but I think—I should like to get very drunk or do something else equally distracting. I need distraction very badly, Dimmesdale. I'm in a devil of a way!"

They dined under the trees of the garden, with no light save the little candles on the table and a half-dozen orange-coloured paper lanterns strung over their heads. But, as the evening advanced, it became cloudy and a warning drop or two of rain splashed through the leaves, so that the two men were driven back into the great studio for their coffee and tobacco.

"It might be a good time," said the painter, after the lamps were lighted and the coffee set

ready to hand, with little decanters of cognac and of coloured liqueurs, "it might be a good time now to tell me about this other guest at Château Monsigny, and about the difficulty you are in. I take it for granted that the other guest was a woman." He laughed, and struck a match to light his cigarette.

But before young Beresford could answer there came a knock at the studio door. Dimmesdale went to open it, and at the sound of the voice from without young Beresford sprang up with a smothered cry.

"Come in, sir," said the painter. "It is very wet. You are Lord Strope, I think?" The old Earl came into the room, setting his wet umbrella near the door.

"Ah!" said he, as he caught sight of Beresford beyond, "I am glad you are here. I thought it quite probable that you might be. It is a very wet night, very wet. These *fiacres* are poor things to be about in when it is stormy, even with the top and boot up." He sat down upon a great divan, chafing his strong hands together and working his eyebrows up and down in his curious gorilla fashion. It was a trick he had when a little excited or a little embarrassed.

"Will you not have some coffee, sir," asked

Dimmesdale, "and a cigarette or a cigar? We had just finished dining and were starting upon the coffee."

"No coffee, thank you," said the old gentleman, "but a little glass of that brandy, if you will be so good. No, I won't smoke."

He drank the brandy slowly and in silence and set down the glass, frowning as if he were at a loss as to how he should commence what he wished to say.

"Mr. Dimmesdale," he began finally, "we are involved, out at Monsigny, in a very strange and very serious tangle of misfortune which threatens great danger to two ancient houses and great unhappiness to several people. I think that you are the only man who can extricate us, and I have come here to ask you to do it. It may be I am so mistaken as to certain facts that you have not the power to help us, or it may be that you will not be willing, but, as I have said, the happiness of a number of people depends, I believe, upon you, and the honour of two houses." He paused a moment, watching the painter's face, and Dimmesdale frowned across at him attentively with puzzled, uncomprehending eyes.

"My son, Lord Stratton," continued the old Earl, slowly, "wishes to marry a certain woman

who calls herself Mrs. Marlowe, but whose real name is Mrs. Travers, the divorced wife of Colonel Travers, formerly of the African Service."

Dimmesdale sat down quietly in a chair which stood near and leaned his head upon his hand. Young Beresford gave another sudden little smothered cry, and would have spoken but that the Earl held up a silencing hand.

"This marriage, as you will readily see," he went on, "would be most unfortunate for obvious reasons. I may explain that my son is not aware of the woman's real identity. He believes her to be the widow she claims to be. Further, this woman, this Mrs. Travers, has, actuated, I believe, by jealousy, broken off an engagement between my granddaughter, Isabeau de Monsigny, and Ashton Beresford, by accusing Mr. Beresford, to Isabeau's father and to myself, of an outrageous course of conduct which, I think, is altogether untrue. She accuses him of having betrayed this Mrs. Travers, whom she claims as a friend of hers, of having been responsible for her divorce, and finally, of having evaded a promise to marry her. These preposterous accusations Mr. Beresford, through some fantastic sense of honour, I take it, refuses to deny. Now, how I discovered the identity of the woman I need not tell you. I

need say only this, that in discovering it I came also upon certain facts which led me to think that you, and you alone, could, if you so desired, clear away all these difficulties, free Ashton Beresford's name from stain and prevent a most unfortunate marriage."

Dimmesdale sat for a long time silent after the Earl had finished. His face was hidden from the light by the hand which supported his head. Then, presently, he rose to his feet and took a turn up and down the long room, and the two men who sat watching him were amazed to see, now that his face was in the light, how suddenly haggard it had grown.

He halted at last before the old Earl, and he threw out his hands with a curious little gesture as if he were very tired.

"I will do anything you wish, sir," he said simply.

CHAPTER XIV

CHAPTER XIV

Lord Stratton was pacing up and down the long flagstoned stretch of the south terrace. There was a brier pipe between his teeth which he believed himself to be smoking, but he forgot it every few minutes so that it went out and had to be relighted, and after awhile he neglected it altogether, biting at the stem and shifting it between his teeth from comfortable habit.

Earlier in the evening it had been raining, but the sky was at this time nearly clear again, save for ragged masses of driven cloud to the southward, and the moon shone like a wash of silver upon the wet leaves of the trees and upon the wet turf and the shining little pools of water at the margin of the avenue.

It had been a most trying day, and although he was not an emotional man nor easily moved, the events which had taken place had moved him strongly, more strongly than he would have believed possible. Isabeau's adventure and narrow escape from death had been a great shock,

for he loved his daughter very dearly. Then, after the matter of her engagement to Ashton Beresford was so satisfactorily arranged, had come Mrs. Marlowe's denunciation of Beresford and his inability to deny the charges. Beresford had acted rather curiously, he thought. He had not borne the air of guilt. Indeed, it seemed impossible that the young man could have been such a blackguard; he would have shown it in other ways. Still, he had not denied the charges. He had admitted their truth. No, he had not done that. He had been careful not to do it. He had said that he could not deny what was charged. There might be something in that. The Viscount took the pipe from his teeth and paused a moment in his walk to consider. Yes, there might be something in that. It was all very strange. He wished that he could see Mrs. Marlowe again to ask for more details. There were certain discrepancies, certain unexplained points in what she had said which he would like to probe, for he was a careful man.

Mrs. Marlowe had not been down for dinner, nor later in the evening. She had sent word that a headache was confining her to her room. The old Earl had eaten a hasty meal alone and very early, after which he had dashed off to Paris on

business of importance, so he said. He had looked unusually alert and eager. So the other three, Isabeau—she would not make excuses and stop away: she had her mother's spirit—Mme. de Brissal, and himself, had sat down to a very silent and very miserable dinner. They had not lingered at the table.

He pulled out his watch as he reached the little patch of moonlight at one end of the terrace. He thought it must be growing late, but was surprised to find that it was but a little after ten. Just at that moment the bugle blew, faint and clear, from the lodge.

"That will be my father, back from Paris," said Lord Stratton. "He must have driven across from Versailles in a hired cab. I think no trap is out of the stables." He waited at the steps of the terrace for the vehicle to come up the long winding avenue, but when it did at last appear from the gloom of the firs—a hired *fiacre*, as he had surmised—there were three men in it instead of one.

The old Earl descended first, and Lord Stratton lifted his eyebrows slightly as Ashton Beresford followed him. The third man he recognised as the painter, Dimmesdale, whom he had once or twice met and rather liked.

The Earl paid off the *cocher* and turned to his son.

"There are certain very important matters affecting us all," he said, "that must be settled to-night; and certain dangers that must be cleared away. I have asked these two gentlemen out here to help us in the affair. Will you come inside?"

Lord Stratton led the way into his great book-lined study without a word. He felt that something momentous was about to happen—something quite beyond his knowledge or expectation, for his father had spoken with more than his usual earnestness, and he knew, moreover, that the Earl would not have brought Ashton Beresford and Dimmesdale out to Monsigny except for an excellent reason.

He sat down beside the great square writing-table which stood in the middle of the room, but his father remained standing near at hand.

"You have been—we have been," said the old Earl, "very greatly deceived in a guest who is now under this roof. She is not who or what she claims to be, and the marriage arrangement between her and yourself must be broken off."

Lord Stratton laughed shortly. "If that is the result of all your mystery and activity," said

he, "you might better have stopped at home. The marriage will not be broken off."

"If you will touch that bell near your hand," said the Earl, with no show of temper—and from that alone his son must have seen how much in earnest he was—"we will send a servant to call her here. I am not speaking idly. I can prove all I say."

"Nonsense!" cried the Viscount. "I shall do nothing of the sort. I will not have my own guest cross-questioned and browbeaten. I shall not ring."

But the Earl took from his pocket a folded slip of paper, the slip cut that afternoon from a London weekly, and gave it to his son.

"Read that!" said he, "and look at the two portraits at the top of the column."

Lord Stratton glanced at the heading and at the two little portraits, and he drew a quick shivering breath and closed his eyes for an instant. Then he read the print through twice. Afterward he sat for a little time silent, with bent head. Then he touched the bell at his side.

"Take my compliments to Mrs. Marlowe and ask her to be so good as to come downstairs to the study on a matter of importance," he said to the servant. "And ask Mme. de Brissal also to

come. I will not have Mrs. Marlowe here without another woman in the room to lend her countenance," he added, turning toward his father.

The servant was absent for several minutes and then returned to say that Mme. de Brissal would be down at once, but that Mrs. Marlowe begged to be excused for this evening, since she was suffering greatly and was on the point of retiring.

"Take my compliments to Mrs. Marlowe," said Lord Stratton, "and tell her that the matter will not admit of delay. Tell her that I am waiting in the study."

But when the man had again left the room, he rose and paced to and fro restlessly. He met the old Earl's somber eyes and halted impatiently.

"What if this is true?" he cried, raising the crumpled slip of paper. "What if she was Mrs. Travers? It does not necessarily mean that she was a guilty woman, nor does it clear *his* name!" And he turned for a moment, frowning, toward young Beresford.

But the Earl put a hand on his son's shoulder and looked into his eyes, shaking his white head.

"She lied, Richard," he said very gently. "She lied about others as well as about herself, and for a reason that will be made plain later.

She was a guilty woman and she has lied throughout. You must let me ask her the questions, for I know many facts that you do not. I shall not browbeat or abuse her, but I must make her tell us the truth; then you will be convinced." He turned to where Dimmesdale sat in the shadow. "Will you step into the farther room beyond those portières?" he said. "It might be better for you not to be seen till the proper time comes. I shall call you."

Then, when the painter had retired through the hangings, they sat down once more, not speaking again, and waited through what seemed a very long time, till there came a slow step outside and Mrs. Marlowe's voice.

"Are you in here, Lord Stratton? Dear me, your message was alarmingly imperative! I was quite terrified, you may be sure! Have I not been quick?" She stood in the doorway, laughing gently and peering forward into the dimly lighted room. She was dressed in a loose trailing house-gown of black, open a little at the neck and with sleeves of lace that came only to the elbows. She was, as always of late, very pale, and the circles under her eyes seemed darker than their wont. Old Mme. de Brissal, greatly wondering and half-frightened, hovered behind

her. Then, all at once Mrs. Marlowe saw the old Earl and Ashton Beresford, and one of her hands went suddenly to her breast.

"Oh," she cried, "I—I thought—I did not know—I thought Lord Stratton was alone."

The Earl came forward at once and pushed out a chair for her. Mme. de Brissal had already slipped into a chair by the door.

"Will you not sit down?" he said, and there was in his tone an absence of its habitual gruffness, a curious change almost to kindness that sent a sudden chill through her. Mrs. Marlowe had always been afraid of the old man, terribly afraid, but this new side of him terrified her afresh.

The Earl sat down opposite her at the big table, folding his arms upon its edge.

"We asked you to come down," he began, "because it is necessary that we should know a little more about certain matters relative to what occurred this afternoon and to—other things. Now, in the first place"—he paused a moment, looking reflectively toward Lord Stratton—"my son has told me that he wishes to marry you, that he has asked for your hand, and that you have accepted him. But a man in high position, Mrs. Marlowe, a man who is of an ancient house and who will, one day, be the head of that house and

Earl of Strope, must think of many things in marrying, many things beyond his inclinations. He must, for one thing, know all about the woman who is to be his wife and possibly the mother of his children. Does it not occur to you that we know very little about you? Will you not tell us more about yourself? You must see that it is necessary. Tell us about your earlier life and your husband and your people and where in England you lived before your husband's death. Let me see—your husband died four years ago, I think you said. In America, was it not?"

"Yes," said the woman in a low voice; "yes, in America, in Chicago. No, no, no, I say! No, not in America! What am I saying? It was in India! Surely I told you India, Lord Strope! Why did you say America?"

"That," said the old gentleman, "was a slip; I meant India, of course. And his name? Ah, I remember! John—John Marlowe."

"Yes," she said again, not raising her eyes, "John Marlowe."

"No, wait!" said the Earl; "wait a moment. Am I not wrong again? Surely, it was Charles—you told my son the other day. Why, yes, of course, it was Charles."

But the woman looked up swiftly with quivering lips, and a white, hunted face.

"Oh, why—why quibble about these little things, Lord Strope?" she cried in a shaking voice that seemed on the edge of sobs. "Why harry me with—with going over and over them? I—I suppose I am a very—foolish—nervous woman, but I—I cannot bear to talk about—all that. It is too—too sad. Let me—go to my room. I will not be questioned so. My husband was John Marlowe—John—John. And he died four years ago in India. Now you have it all! Let me go! John Marlowe, sir, John Marlowe!"

"Monseigneur, oh, monseigneur," begged old Mme. de Brissal, "be gentle, monseigneur. Remember that madame is a woman, and not well. Be gentle, monseigneur!"

"Not John *Travers*, madame, not John *Travers!*" cried the Earl in a great stern voice, raising himself half out of his chair and leaning across the table toward Mrs. Marlowe, his fierce old eyes glittering under their shaggy brows.

The woman gave a sudden, gasping cry and fell forward against the edge of the table with her hands under her. Then, in an instant, she had whirled upon Ashton Beresford like a cornered animal.

"You told!" she cried, in a shaking whisper. "You told, you coward! Ah, you contemptible coward! You broke your word and told them—to save yourself!"

"No," said young Beresford, quietly, "I have told nothing. You know I would not tell to save myself."

"This told," said the old Earl; "this betrayed you, Mrs. Travers. I cut it out of a weekly paper." And he passed her the slip that Lord Stratton had read a few moments before.

She looked at the two portraits and she read the notice through slowly to the end. Then, as Lord Stratton had done, she sat a long time silent, with bowed head and drooping shoulders.

"Yes," she said at last in a tired voice, "yes, I am Mrs. Travers. I will pretend no longer. You have trapped me at last, run me to earth. Aren't you proud of it? Isn't it something to gloat over?" She looked up with a sort of pitiful sneering bitterness. "Aren't you proud of it?" she said again, "three great men who've harried and hunted and driven from pillar to post a poor woman whom another man had cast out from his home! Oh, it's a triumph, isn't it? It's a capital game, isn't it? Why had I not a right to my life?" she cried in a mounting voice. "Why had

I not a right to change my name and to live among my own class who would have turned me out of their doors if they had known who I was? Was I not as good as they, the people I went among? Aye, better, better! Oh, infinitely better for you to know the lives that some of them lead—but no lying divorce bill has robbed them of all that makes a woman's life sweet." She turned desperately to Lord Stratton, where he sat in a great chair, his elbows on its arms and his hands supporting his head, and she slipped down on the floor so that she was kneeling before him, and her hands clung to an arm of the chair.

"Oh, are you like the rest of them?" she cried, sobbing a little. "Are you going to cast me out to—to God knows what, this time? Are you going to cry shame after me and point your finger at me because I was another man's wife and people lied to him? What does it matter who I was? You have wished to marry me. You have asked me to marry you and I am no different than I was then. Oh, I would make you a good wife. I swear I would; I swear it! I've wanted so to marry you! It would be such a new life to me, such peace and comfort and content! You don't know the hell I've been through for five years, the fear, the dread, the lying! Ah, how I hated it all!

Don't cast me off, Lord Stratton! You said I was the only woman you would think of marrying and I'm the same woman now. Am I not? am I not? I could make you happy, you know I could. Don't turn me away for a lying divorce bill!"

"*Was* it a lying divorce bill, Mrs. Travers?" said the old Earl from the table. "Was it?"

She swung about toward him and looked swiftly from his face to Ashton Beresford's and back again. Her eyes were wide and burning and hunted, like those of an animal which is sore pressed.

"Lying?" she whispered hoarsely, and waited to steady her voice. "Lying? Yes, it was lying! Yes, yes, of course it was lying! Did you think I was guilty of what they said—the witnesses, those horrible witnesses? I was innocent, I say, innocent! Oh, don't you believe me? Ask—ask him! Ask Ashton Beresford! Tony, Tony, tell them that I was innocent! Oh, that you could think such things! I—I swear I was innocent!"

"Dimmesdale!" said the old Earl, raising his voice a little, "Dimmesdale!" The hangings beyond parted for an instant to admit the painter, who stood, white and haggard, behind the Earl's chair.

"Harry! Harry!" screamed the woman, and sprang swiftly to her feet and started toward him; but she fell forward, tripping on her skirt, and caught herself with her hands against the edge of the table. And she clung there, shaking from head to foot, her face hidden on her arms.

Mme. de Brissal left her chair by the door, where she had sat frightened and silently weeping through all the tense scene, and sank on her knees beside the crouching woman, slipping her arms about the bowed shoulders and murmuring comfort into the heedless ears, as one murmurs to a frenzied child.

But Mrs. Marlowe put her aside and lifted her white face desperately.

"It's a lie!" she cried, choking with her sobs. "It's all a horrible lie! Don't believe what Harry Dimmesdale has told you. He's lying, lying! He always was a liar! He lied to me in the first place, and when the thing all came out he ran away, and he lied to me afterward. Don't believe him. Ah, to think that I loved him once! I tell you, it's all a lie!" Then she dropped her face once more upon her hands and fell to weeping and shivering as she crouched beside the table.

Dimmesdale came forward a little from behind the Earl's chair and looked toward Lord Stratton.

"I was the man, sir," he said, in a low tone, "who made it possible for Colonel Travers to obtain his divorce. It was I who was seen by the witnesses in company with Mrs. Travers—it was not Beresford! It was I who ran away at the time the case came up, leaving Beresford, who was innocent, to face what I should have faced. I was his friend, and I have continued to be his friend outwardly since then, for he has never known what I did. He has never known that Mrs. Travers was guilty of what they charged against her. That is why he offered to marry her, because he thought that she was innocent and that her life had been unjustly wrecked. He offered to marry her and she would not accept because she—she loved me at the time and hoped that I would marry her. She did not know quite what a coward and blackguard I was; or, knowing, would not believe it. Afterward she came to love him, Beresford, remembering what he had borne for her. She cared for him more, I think, than she ever cared for me, but she knew that he did not love her. I suppose that is why she tried to ruin him in your eyes. Women can be unbelievably cruel to those they love. That is all the story, sir. I have been a coward and a scoundrel and worse. I have betrayed and deserted a

woman and I have left a friend to suffer for my sins, but I have not been altogether free from suffering myself. I have lived in hell for five years. Thank God, it is to come to an end, this living lie, this whited sepulcher of a life!"

He had fallen to pacing up and down the room and his calmness had given way to an excitement that was on the verge of hysteria. His hands worked and twisted and his forehead shone wet in the cross light from the candles.

"Thank God, it is over!" he cried again. "At least, I can be honest and open in my villainy now. I can be known for the blackguard that I am. I tell you that I have lived in hell! I could not have borne it much longer. Thank God that in unmasking I can be of actual service where a service is needed!" He turned with bowed head and went out of the room, and young Beresford, catching the Earl's eye, rose and left the room also.

Then for a long time no one spoke, and nothing broke the silence in the room, save that now and then the woman, crouching at the end of the table, sobbed and moaned softly to herself, or Mme. de Brissal, weeping by the doorway, spoke aloud in little protesting murmurs. But at last the old Earl raised himself with a sigh.

"Is this true, Mrs. Travers?" he asked.

"Yes," said the woman, in a low, dead voice; "oh, yes, it is true. Why should I lie any further?"

"Then," said he gravely, "this marriage cannot take place." She must, of course, already have realised this, but the words brought her head up with a desperate cry of protest.

"Ah, no, no!" she cried; "don't say that! Ah, give me a chance to prove that I've left behind me all that would soil or degrade a woman. Give me a chance—some hope, some little hope! I am not a bad woman, Lord Strope. Oh, I'm not! I'm a better woman than many you know and meet and like. If I—if I was—wicked long ago, it was because I—was tempted, was offered a love that—that I knew better than to hope for at home. God in heaven! have I not suffered for what I did? Do you know how I have suffered for five years? You never suffered so in all your long life. Oh, why is a woman blackened and stained forever, degraded because she has sinned once? Can she never be clean again? Can she not repent, oh, bitterly? Why is the woman damned and the man forgiven, sir? No, no, no! Don't cast me off utterly because of what I was. I'm not that sort of woman now, I swear to you

I'm not. If I've lied to-night, it was to save myself from just what you are threatening now. You don't blame a trapped, cornered animal for fighting. Don't blame me for lying. I—I was so eager to put away all that past horror, to forget it, to make believe it never had been. I wanted to start a new, clean, peaceful life. That isn't so much to ask! Ah, don't refuse me! Give me a chance to show that I'm a good woman, that I can be faithful and pure and constant like other women. Oh, are you all so immaculate that you can turn a woman out into the world, out into despair and hopelessness, because she has erred once, long, long ago?"

Her sobbing had risen again with her voice until it shook all the frail body piteously.

The old Earl raised his head and his face was very sad, but it was stern and inflexible.

"I did not make the law, my child," said he, "the great and ancient law which condemns the woman but not the man. Perhaps I should have made it differently, perhaps not. It is the law, and we who live here must obey it."

"Monseigneur is right, *ma pauvre*," said Mme. de Brissal, from her chair near the door. She had ceased weeping, but her voice still trembled and broke from time to time, for she was very much

moved. "Monseigneur is right, *ma pauvre*. Sin is a terrible thing, whether in a man or in a woman, but, I think, justly more terrible in a woman, for we are of finer flesh and we live not so exposed a life. They have a right, the men, to demand that the mothers of their sons and daughters shall have been honest women, and it would be a monstrous thing for a man to give his future innocent children a mother whose life had been impure." She crossed the room and stood beside the woman who crouched there, stroking the disheveled hair and the hot cheeks with her trembling old fingers.

"You are still a young woman, my child," she continued. "If you should marry Richard you might well expect to bear children. Dare you think of becoming the mother of Earls of Strope? Dare you think of bringing into the world daughters to be tainted by your early life? No, this marriage must not take place. They come of a proud old house, Monseigneur and Richard. They bear a proud old name, and it lays on them obligations. Oh, my child, it wrings my old woman's heart to say these things, but they are as true as death. The marriage must not take place."

But the other woman turned, still kneeling, and

clasped the knees of the man she had promised to marry.

"Do you, too, cast me off, Richard?" she asked, very low, and she seemed to have gone beyond tears and sobbing into a place of deeper and more terrible grief. "Have you, as well, no pity? Are you, also, cold and just, terribly just? And do you cling to the law which sees only one side? Oh, Richard, Richard, I should make you a faithful wife! I should bring you comfort and content and, I think, happiness. Do you cast me off, Richard? Aye, I know of what you are thinking. I loved Ashton Beresford. See! I am quite honest—I love him now, but he does not love me and I could not marry him. You cannot understand because you are a man. Oh, Richard, I should be a good wife to you, and I long so for peace—peace and quiet! Do you cast me off, Richard?"

Lord Stratton raised his face, white and drawn and haggard, and caught his father's eye.

"Leave us," he said; "leave us for a little." But the old Earl came and stood over him, looking down very keenly into the younger man's face, and he put out a hand upon the broad shoulder.

"There will be no weakening, no giving way?" he appealed.

"There will be no weakening," said Lord Stratton. Then the Earl straightened up with a quick breath and, together with Mme. de Brissal, went softly out of the room, closing the door behind them.

They found the others, who had preceded them, in the *salon* with its white-and-gold furniture and the great mirror over the mantel-shelf. The old gentleman laid an elbow upon the mantel and rested his white head on his hand.

"It is a cruel law," said he, after a time, "but it is the law. All law is cruel. What will become of her? I have never liked her, but I am sorry for her, now. What will become of her?"

"I shall try to persuade her to marry me," said Dimmesdale. "I have always loved her as much as such a man as I can love. I was too much of a coward and too selfish to marry her before. After a time—not now—but after a time I think she will marry me. It is the only reparation I can make. Perhaps we shall be able, after all, to patch together something of a life. She is a good woman by nature. She told the truth about that."

Young Beresford had wandered restlessly out of the room, into the little hall that led out to the south terrace. Some one was coming down the

stairs from above, some one all in white with certain roses. She halted a moment as she saw him in the dim light, and then ran to him with a little cry.

"Ah, you have come back to me, my heart? You have come back to me?" she said. And she pressed close to him, holding him by the lapels of his coat—staring up into his face with great glad eyes. "You've come back to me?" she whispered again, trembling, and she said the words over and over again as if she could not realise that it was true.

Then a sudden burning flush swept over young Beresford's cheeks and his arms went around the girl, crushing her till the breath caught and gasped between her lips, lifting her from the floor till her eyes were close to his, for in the moment he had forgotten, like the old Earl, how terribly strong he was.

When, after a time, he set her down again, they were both shaking a bit and very pale, and no words would come to their lips, only stammerings. Isabeau broke into a strange little hysterical fit of laughter.

"It is over, sweetest," said young Beresford at last. "The trouble is over and done with. There is nothing between us now." He raised the

girl's two hands, palms upward, in his, and laid his face in them. It was like laying one's face in flowers.

"There is nothing between us now," he said again.

Isabeau's strange little nervous fit of laughter stopped short.

"What—has happened?" she cried swiftly. "What has she—done? Did they make her—did *grandpère* make her tell the truth? Ah, I was afraid she would never confess! Is that what you were all about in the study? I heard strange voices and cries and some one weeping aloud. I did not know what it was all about. Ah, you're free, *mon cœur, quite* free?"

Young Beresford slipped an arm about her waist and turned toward the door which gave upon the south terrace; and she, moving a half-pace before him, rested her shoulders and her beautiful head against his breast, so that as they walked it was, unconsciously, as the other Isabeau de Monsigny had loved to walk with her husband more than twenty years before.

They went out together into the cool sweet moonlight which silvered the flagstoned terrace. There was no evidence left of the evening's rain save a little shining pool or two beside the gravel

drive. There were stars in a sapphire sky, many millions of them, and a warm breeze bore up from the west with a burden of roses, and brought from the stables the sound of a voice that sang to a mandolin, old songs, old as the walls of Château Monsigny.

Beresford glanced backward over his shoulder at the gloomy doorway from which he had come, and he looked before him at all the silver splendour of the moonlight. It seemed to him, though he was little given to abstractions and imaginings, curiously symbolic—out of the shadow of sin and bitterness and intrigue and jealousy into a moon-bathed garden that was full of the scent of roses and the lilt of a voice that sang.

Isabeau de Monsigny stirred her head where it lay in the hollow of his shoulder and "the soul of gold" brushed his lips—lay soft against his cheek.

"Where are the black butterflies, monsieur," she whispered. "Where are the clouds that were on our souls? Where is the *tristesse* that hung over Monsigny?"

"Oh, gone, my queen!" cried Ashton Beresford; "gone, gone!"

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